The New Criterion

February 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *February 1995*

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Samuel Lipman

[1934–1994]

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Notes & Comments: February 1995

Victims & critics

Like many people, we have pretty much given up reading *The New Yorker*. Under the editorship of Tina Brown, that venerable bastion of limousine liberalism has been jerked sharply to the left and infused with the same sort of preening frivolity and radical chic that Miss Brown brought to the pages of *Vanity Fair*. Imagine our surprise, then, when a friend called our attention to Arlene Croce's extraordinary and wide-ranging article "Discussing the Undiscussable" in the issue of December 26–January 2. It is certainly one of the most important pieces of cultural criticism that *The New Yorker* has published in recent memory.

Although she has not been writing as much these past few years as she once did, Miss Croce is well known as one of the most vigorous and authoritative dance critics of her generation. In this instance, however, Miss Croce's subject was not dance but the cataclysm that has overtaken our cultural life. The occasion for her meditation was *Still/Here*, a multimedia performance piece about AIDS by the much celebrated black, gay choreographer Bill T. Jones. (It is reviewed in this issue by Laura Jacobs.) This was hardly Mr. Jones's first appearance in the pages of *The New Yorker*: in November, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., doyen of Afro-American studies at Harvard, published an appreciation of Jones in the magazine. Featuring videotapes of terminally ill people talking about their illnesses—Mr. Jones has made the fact that he is HIV-positive part of his act—*Still/Here* was recently presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to the predictable hosannahs from all politically correct quarters.

Equally predictable was the response to Miss Croce's piece: enthusiastic support from critics of political correctness, abuse from such dependable sources of liberal orthodoxy as *The Village Voice* (which published two attacks on the piece in the same issue) and the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. The fact that the piece appeared under the novel rubric "A Critic at Bay" suggests that the editors of *The New Yorker* were themselves uneasy about the piece.

Miss Croce did not review *Still/Here*—indeed, she dropped the first bombshell of "Discussing the Undiscussable" by explaining that she had not seen the performance and had no intention of seeing it. Instead, she adduced *Still/Here* as a vivid example of her real subject: the proliferation in our culture of "victim art" and its attendant attitude of politically correct self-righteousness. "By working dying people into his act," Miss Croce writes, "Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism. I think of him as literally undiscussable—the most extreme

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case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs." Miss Croce continues:

> The thing that "Still/Here" makes immediately apparent, whether you see it or not, is that victimhood is a kind of mass delusion that has taken hold of previously responsible sectors of our culture. The preferred medium of victimhood . . . is videotape, . . . but the cultivation of victimhood by institutions devoted to the care of art is a menace to all art forms, particularly performing-art forms.

In fact, this disaster infects virtually every department of cultural life. In the visual arts, for example, what Miss Croce refers to variously as "Warholism" and the "Humpty-Dumpty view" of art—If I say it is art, then it is art—has "pretty well demolished the need for serious criticism." Avant-gardists such as Marcel Duchamp and John Cage were instrumental in nurturing this anti-artistic approach to cultural life—as, later, was Andy Warhol and the whole phenomenon of Pop Art. In the end, these exercises in artistic futility depend upon that version of aestheticism which seeks to erase the boundary between life and art. The announced goal is usually to immunize art from the incursions of philistinism, but the result is that both art and life are denatured. As Miss Croce notes, although this move was originally meant to confound cultural philistines, today "the philistines are likely to be the artists themselves." It is perhaps ironic that what originated as part of an anti-establishment avant-garde should now work to consolidate a new establishment. But Miss Croce's point remains: "The kind of 'innovation' that seeks to relieve critics of their primary task of evaluation is always suspect."

In this sense, Miss Croce's remarkable essay is "a plea for the critic." "I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about," she notes. Nor can she review someone who has short-circuited criticism by foisting off social grievances as art, a capacious category that includes performers who present themselves as "dissed blacks, abused women, or disenfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art. I can live with the flabby, the feeble, the scoliotic," Miss Croce writes. "But with the righteous I cannot function at all." What we are dealing with here is not really art but "a politicized version of the blackmail that certain performers resort to . . . Instead of compassion, these performers induce, and even invite, a cozy kind of complicity. When a victim artist finds his or her public, a perfect, mutually manipulative union is formed which no critic may put asunder."

Miss Croce is quite right that ideology has had a lot to do with the development of victim art, and she is right again that the ideology in question has its roots in the cultural radicalism that began in the 1930s and came to full flower in the 1960s. "The ideological boosters of utilitarian art," she writes, "hark back to the political crusades of the sixties—against Vietnam, for civil rights. The sixties, in turn, harked back to the proletarian thirties, when big-government bureaucracy began." In the case of Bill T. Jones, when he declared himself HIV-positive and made his medical condition the focus of his performance, "the permissive thinking of the sixties was back, and in the most pernicious form"—a form that combines radical politics and narcissistic grandstanding to produce the moralizing spectacle of victim art.

As Miss Croce points out, it is not only criticism but also art itself that is threatened by this cult of victimhood. She speaks here of the "utilitarian" view of art that has triumphed in our culture: the view, fostered by our arts bureaucracies and reinforced by the academy, the media, and even by many artists, that art is valuable primarily as an in-

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strument of social enlightenment and moral consciousness-raising. What this approach undermines is the independence of cultural life, replacing it with a pious moralism that poaches on the prestige of art in its effort to enforce political conformity. The curious result is that art is simultaneously overvalued and undercut: overvalued in the way a fetish is overvalued—valued, that is, in a perverted, uncritical fashion—and undercut in that its true function, as a medium for aesthetic exploration, is systematically thwarted. Criticism degenerates into a species of propaganda and the ideal of disinterestedness becomes, in Miss Croce's term, "anathema." This is the nidus in which victim art festers, defying criticism "not only because we feel sorry for the victim but because we are cowed by art."

In this context, Miss Croce astutely introduces the case of Robert Mapplethorpe, another AIDS victim whose life and work has "effectively disarmed criticism." When the jury in Cincinnati acquitted a museum director of charges of obscenity for mounting Mapplethorpe's sado-masochistic photographs, they did so primarily because "expert testimony" had convinced them that the pictures were art—and hence beyond the reach of criticism. "The possibility that Mapplethorpe was a bad artist or that good art could be obscene," Miss Croce writes, "seems not to have occurred to anyone." The point is that if art is an important value, it is nonetheless not the *only* value; it takes its place in a constellation of values that make up the texture of human life; by placing art and the artist beyond criticism, the champions of victim art succeed in trivializing both.

Miss Croce's essay is a virtuoso performance. Yet what is most significant is that it was published in *The New Yorker* by a distinguished writer not hitherto noted for her resistance to the ideology of victim art. Many of her chief points have already been made by others—including others writing in the pages of *The New Criterion*. But they have never been made so categorically in the mainstream liberal press by a critic with unimpeachable liberal credentials. Which is why the politically correct reaction against Miss Croce has been so vituperative. Writing in *The Village Voice*, Deborah Jowitt dismissed "Discussing the Undiscussable" as a "screed," while Richard Goldstein, the *Voice*'s executive editor, mounted a tooth-and-claw attack that imputed "a Helmsian, not to say Stalinist, stench" to the essay and purported to discover "racist and homophobic aperçus" in Miss Croce's prose.

Mr. Goldstein's animadversion includes a number of silly things—including a description of T. S. Eliot and Fyodor Dostoevsky as "deans of victim art"—but perhaps his silliest blunder is describing Arlene Croce as a "neoconservative." As we have reason to know, "neoconservative" has emerged as an all-purpose term of abuse. And while we welcome the appellation and everything it stands for, we dutifully acknowledge that despite Miss Croce's many virtues she is anything but a neoconservative. But to a mind smitten with the pieties of victimhood, anyone who exposes the sinister fatuousness of political correctness is guilty of "neoconservative" tendencies. Thus Mr. Goldstein's rant about the "cruelty" of Miss Croce's "neoconservative rhetoric." And thus the ever-flatulent Frank Rich, who in *The New York Times* also derided Miss Croce as a "neoconservative" and then—amazingly—concluded that her attack on victim art meant that she believed "death and dying can be off limits as subjects for art." Miss Croce never said or implied any such thing; but for the likes of Miss Jowitt and Messrs. Goldstein and Rich she said something far worse: that the sentimentalization of death and dying is not itself a replacement for art. Miss Croce's essay brilliantly anatomizes the seduction of art by narcissistic political barbarism. It is that which her critics find unforgivable.

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Filthy is as filthy does

Readers of *The Spectator*—the London one, not its American cousin—will remember the fracas that erupted last fall when William Cash published "Kings of the Deal," a story about Jewish influence in Hollywood. Indignant charges of anti-Semitism were immediately lodged not only against Mr. Cash but also against *The Spectator* and its editor, Dominic Lawson. Never mind that Mr. Lawson is himself Jewish, or that he wrote a penetrating essay on the virus of political correctness with special reference to this controversy (see "The Gagging of America" in *The Spectator* for November 19, 1994).

We do not wish at this late date to comment on the controversy itself—though we shall long treasure the ridiculous missive signed jointly by a number of Hollywood stars, including Barbra Streisand, Kevin Costner, and Tom Cruise. We do, however, think that our readers will be pleased to know that Leon Wieseltier, the inveterately sophomoric literary editor of *The New Republic*, contributed the following minatory effusion to *The Spectator*:

> Sir: William Cash worries about "inevitable shrieks of 'anti-Semitism'" as a consequence of his anti-Semitism. Not to worry. People as powerful as us have no need to shriek. We will bide our time and silently see justice done. Maybe before Passover. You run a filthy magazine.

Gee. We thought we had a low opinion of Mr. Wieseltier, but clearly it was not low enough. It was with some amusement, then, that we read Guillermo Cabrera Infante's review of the third edition of *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* in *The New Republic* for January 23. Here is how it begins:

> The other evening at Le Bistro, in South Kensington, supping with an Italian film director, all of a sudden and apropos of nothing he praised Robert Aldrich. "What a director!" he exclaimed with garlic-scented vowels. "Just imagine, *Kiss Me Deadly* was his first film!" For a moment I heard him say *Kiss Me Daddy*. Then I retorted (I always retort), "But that was not Aldrich's first movie." "Yes it was," affirmed the *regista*. "It wasn't," I insisted. "He made *Apache* and *Vera Cruz* first." Obviously he didn't believe me. To redirect him, I said: "See *Katz*." He said, "But *Cats* is an English musical!" I should have laughed, but when it comes to the movies I am always serious.
>
> Film directors shouldn't argue with me about movies. I can kiss them deadly. I explained what *Katz* was, *The Film Encyclopedia* by Ephraim Katz, and suggested to the Italian that he buy a copy, since he could afford it. (Not many people can.) When I came home and consulted my *Katz*, I found out that I was wrong, too. Aldrich had made *The Big Leaguer* and *World for Ransom* earlier. That's why *Katz* has nine lives. David Thomson's *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (both books have just been reissued) has even more lives than *Katz*, but unlike Katz, Thomson is a killer with a deus ex machinegun.

To appreciate the cause of our amusement, one must have read the review by G. Cabrera Infante of the third edition of *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (and of the book by Katz mentioned above) that appeared in the December 31 issue of *The Spectator*. Here is how it begins:

> The other evening at Le Bistro, South Kensington, an Italian film director with whom I was supping all of a sudden, and *à propos* of nothing, praised Robert Aldrich. "What a director!" he exclaimed, with garlic-scented vowels. "Just imagine, *Kiss Me Deadly* was his first film!" For a moment I heard him say *Kiss Me Daddy* but then I retorted (I always retort): "But that was not . . ."

Yes, yes, it goes on and on: Katz, *Cats*, and their nine-plus lives. Mr. Wieseltier might think *The Spectator* "a filthy magazine," but he clearly finds things to admire about its taste in book reviews.

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Farewell to the MLA

by Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball

You might think that after all the attention lavished on the annual, post-Christmas meetings of the Modern Language Association in recent years, the 110th convention in San Diego, California, last December would have little to offer in the way of shock or surprise. After all, the rampant politicization of literary study that the MLA has aggressively supported in our colleges and universities is now an established datum of American cultural life. The priority that this mammoth academic bureaucracy (total membership: 31,000) accords to such issues as race, gender, and class in its professional deliberations is no longer news, and neither is its elevation of popular culture to a position of parity with great works of literature as subjects for classroom study. Yet the growth of the MLA's radical agenda continues to spawn new outrages. Readers of *The New Criterion* in particular may think that they already know the worst that an annual convention of the MLA can bring, as we have reported on it in detail twice before.[1] Unfortunately, the old adage that things are always worse than you think has a special relevance when it comes to the MLA: the actual discussions that dominate the organization's meetings continue to outdistance even the most dour expectations. Hence this firsthand report on the MLA's latest gathering.

At the outset it is worth recalling that it was as long ago as 1972, in the first Thomas Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, that Lionel Trilling expressed his dismay at the historic change that had overtaken the profession which the MLA represents. "Within the literature-teaching profession itself," Trilling observed, "there is now a significant body of opinion which holds that literature, so far from having an educative power, can only obscure truth and impede virtue." It is noteworthy, too, that Trilling cited the leadership of the MLA as the locus of this fateful shift in attitude toward the teaching of literature. The key passage is worth quoting:

> This view has been put forward by a person no less eminent in the profession than a recent president of the Modern Language Association, Professor Louis Kampf, who in his presidential address of 1971 assured his colleagues that the teaching of literature in American colleges is now virtually at its end, having lost all rational justification. Professor Kampf made references to what he correctly takes to have been Matthew Arnold's shaping influence upon the literature-teaching profession in America. But he did not locate that influence in the part of Arnold's theory of literature where it truly resides, in the continuing force of the famous characterization of literature as "a criticism of life" and in Arnold's definition

1 See "The MLA Centennial Follies," in our issue for February 1984, and "The Periphery vs. the Center: The MLA in Chicago," in our issue for February 1991.

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> of criticism as the effort "to see the object as in itself it really is," the objects upon which it directs itself being not literature alone but also ideas in general and most especially ideas about society. Professor Kampf characterizes literature in a way that is at an opposite pole from Arnold's—literature, he says, is nothing but "a diversion and a spectacle," it exists wholly in what he calls the "realm of aesthetics" and thus stands at an ultimate remove from "practical activity." That is to say, it has no possible bearing upon the matters which must be the chief or only objects of concern, the anomalies and injustices of American life.

Trilling further observed that because Professor Kampf spoke "as the elected chief officer" of the MLA, "in his estimate of the morale of his constituency there must be a quantum of truth." His conclusion was appropriately stark, and in retrospect turns out to have been prophetic: "We must therefore say that in our time the mind of a significant part of a once proud profession has come to the end of its tether."

What has supplanted the teaching of literature in the classrooms of our colleges and universities since that grim pronouncement was made has, of course, become a subject of widespread and acrimonious debate beyond the teaching profession itself. To say that politics of a certain kind—the kind that stems from the campus insurrections of the Sixties—has displaced literature as the primary object of study is true as far as it goes; but it does not begin to suggest the many bizarre and insidious changes that have overtaken the radical politics of the academy and the culture in the interim. Although what Trilling called "the anomalies and injustices of American life" continue to enjoy an unquestioned priority in classrooms ostensibly devoted to literary study, the question of what constitutes an anomaly or an injustice has been so greatly and so rapidly expanded in recent years that it may now be said to apply to life itself and not merely to those aspects of American political life that are found wanting in social and economic perfection.

To understand what has happened to the study of literature and the humanities in our colleges and universities, it is therefore necessary to understand the ways in which the radical movement that came out of the Sixties has itself been so profoundly altered that the conventional use of the word "politics" no longer completely suffices to describe the objects of its wrath. It is now the fundamentals of life and their role in shaping our destiny that constitute the "texts," as they are called, which are believed to be in urgent need of explication and revision. Literature, to the extent that it is still studied at all, tends to be cited as an accessory to the crimes that have been committed against the "texts" of life.

Gender, for example, is especially favored among these scrutinized "texts," and it is generally assumed—for the purposes of political analysis, anyway—to be culturally determined and therefore subject to cultural redefinition. And if it should be objected that this radical concept of gender does not enjoy scientific support, then science itself must be indicted as a repressive "text" in similar need of cultural revision. Exactly how these and other forms of ideological mystification now shape the discussion of literature and culture in the academy will become apparent, we believe, in the report which follows.

Commencing on Tuesday, December 27, at 3:30 P.M., last year's convention—which included nearly eight hundred sessions and and brought together some nine thousand members of the MLA—continued through 1:15 P.M. on Friday, December 30. As we were obliged to depart on the morning of December 30, we could not attend the Friday sessions and so missed the opportunity to attend convocations devoted to such topics as "Constructing . . . a Female Symbolic," "Sapphic Authorship in Nineteenth-Century England," "Russian Lesbian, Gay (and Queer?) Studies: The State of the (Emerging) Field," "Feminist Criticism and the Politics of Theory," "Queer Space," "Que(e)rying Sexuality," and "Modernism, Gender, and Culture," among many others.

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(The ellipsis and parentheses, by the way, are part of the original decoration.) We trust, however, that our observations about some of the sessions that we attended Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday will be sufficient to convey a sense of the spirit that presided over this 110th annual convention of the Modern Language Association.

Tuesday, December 27

It would be paltering with the truth to say that we approached the commencement of the convention festivities this afternoon with light hearts. We had both been to MLA conventions before and therefore knew what to expect. Persons with complicated dental histories will perhaps understand our emotions. As we threaded our ways through the buzzing corridors to our separate sessions, we felt as if we were in for three straight days of root-canal therapy with only boredom as an anaesthetic. In this respect, at least, we were not to be disappointed.

We were not alone in our apprehension, however. The weather in San Diego was beautiful that first day, but in the crowded chambers of the San Diego Marriott, the Hyatt Regency, and the San Diego Convention Center, there were many, many gloomy faces. They belonged to the hordes of graduate students and assistant professors who each year fly thousands of miles at their own considerable expense to congregate at the MLA convention and compete with each other for the meager handful of jobs that exist in their specialized fields. At such gatherings, there are two main types of facial expression among academics: the smug countenance in all its varieties belongs to the person with tenure; the haunted, hollow look, tremulously parched-mouthed and sycophantic, belongs to members of the untenured mass. The latter provided the convention's one note of genuine pathos.

Of the many other things that this opening day of the convention made clear, the most important was this: that the feminization of the profession is now complete. It determines not only a vast number of the subjects that are discussed but also the methodologies and language that are employed in their analysis. Where, then, does this leave the other sex, as it were? Lest they find themselves intellectually marginalized by this development—if not, indeed, shut out of the discussion entirely—male members of the profession have hastened to conform to the new gender-based ideological standards by abjectly adopting the language, the methodologies, and the objects of feminist discourse.

Or else they take refuge in gay studies and "queer" theory—an expanding field of academic study, and the only one, it seems, in which a male perspective now enjoys an unchallenged legitimacy. Given the dominance of feminist discourse, however, even in the prospering field of gay studies and queer theory the feminist imperative shapes a good deal of the discussion, for the lesbian perspective commands a privileged status in this field. One of its privileges is precisely the freedom to engage in a derisive assault on male sexuality—a practice it is obviously not in the interest of male homosexuals to emulate, and one that it would be impolitic for them to respond to by similarly ridiculing female sexuality.

Does all this suggest that the agenda of the MLA convention is, among much else, a battleground on which conflicting strategies of radical sexual philosophies are being tested for legitimacy and preferment? That was certainly our impression, and more often that not it was the programs devoted to sexual theory and sexual politics—as well as those devoted to the politics of race, imperialism, etc.—that drew the largest and most enthusiastic audiences.

It is said, of course—most emphatically by the press office of the MLA—that despite these ideological deformations, the traditional study of great literature is alive and well at the convention. To test this claim, we decided that one of us would devote the first afternoon of the convention to sampling the offerings of precisely those programs that seemed to be about great writers.

The first visit was to a session sponsored

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by the Joseph Conrad Society of America about what was called "The Dynamics of Genre Shift in the Conrad Canon." The speaker originally scheduled to give the opening paper, on "*The Secret Agent* and Hitchcock's *Sabotage*: The Engendering of Desire," had to drop out, but there are apparently so many Conrad specialists who now prefer to talk about movies instead of literature that the Conrad Society had no difficulty in finding another speaker on this subject with a paper ready to be read. The author of that paper, however, turned out to be a professor of feminist and cinema studies at Drexler University, and what she mostly talked about wasn't Conrad's novel but Alfred Hitchcock's "emerging concept of the cinematic." We stayed the course for that paper, however, and only made our exit as we heard the next speaker invoke the authority of—who else?—Walter Benjamin for a discussion of *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic travesty of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There was clearly no hope here of hearing Conrad's own writings discussed as literature. Leaving when we did, we missed the final paper of the session, "*The Secret Agent* from Serial to Comic Book," but we were willing to suffer that loss.

Our next stop took us to a session on "Midwestern Literature," in which another of our favorite writers—Willa Cather—was scheduled for discussion. It was painful, however, to hear Cather's fiction reduced to the terms of pop anthropology—"the gendering of the land," etc.—and the comparisons made between Cather and Toni Morrison were too preposterous to be borne. The speaker who delivered this feminist tripe was only interesting as an example of male abasement in the face of an ideological juggernaut. It was a sad spectacle.

Meanwhile, as one of us listened to these assaults on Conrad and Cather, the other chose to visit the session on "Feminist Perspectives on the Frankfurt School," which drew a standing-room-only crowd and turned out to offer a little of everything—except, of course, literature. No sooner had we seated ourselves and unpacked the trusty tape recorder than we heard the familiar whine of the dentist's drill—no, sorry, our mistake: it was only the sound of the first speaker, who had come to "clarify the function of femininity in Frankfurt School thought, with an emphasis on re-reading the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the context of gender." Ah, yes, we knew it well: the "critique of patriarchy and logocentricsm," old friends such as the feminist icons Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, not to mention Judith Butler, the young philosopher of queer theory who our rough tabulation identified as the second most frequently referred to person at the convention. The most frequently cited figure was undoubtedly Walter Benjamin, the hapless Marxist critic and protégé of Adorno who committed suicide while fleeing from the Nazis in 1940.

Although he is sometimes a suggestive writer, Benjamin is also a consummately fuzzy thinker, and his opacity, combined with his portentous animus against all things "bourgeois," make him an ideal mascot for the contemporary academic radical. Consider: the second paper, "The Gender Politics of Benjamin's *Theory of History*," began by quoting the edifying thought that "I have never been able to imagine a creative spirit without genitalia" before proceeding to enlighten us about how Benjamin opened up the "general question of gender and discourse":

> The affinity of language, naming, and sexuality allows us to read Benjamin's text not only as a metaphor for the gendering of language but conversely as . . . linguistification or discursivization of gender and sexuality. Gender itself is quite literally for Benjamin a moment of language in its metaphorical productivity and interlinguistic . . .

Actually, this is a calumny upon Benjamin, who could be loopy but never this loopy, and who, to his credit, at least wrote well.

"Feminist Perspectives on the Frankfurt School" continued with someone who in-

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sisted on reading long passages in German aloud despite her execrable accent, and wound up with "'Babe' Feminism's Salable Image: The Co-optation of Women's Resistance by the Culture Industry," which filtered Anna Quindlen (the heroine) and Naomi Wolf (the villain) through the thought of Horkheimer, Adorno, and, yes, old WB. It should be mentioned that left-wing academics have always been wild about Horkheimer and Adorno's essay on "the culture industry" because, in addition to being anti-modern and anti-bourgeois, it is violently anti-American. For example, it is full of accusations that the "culture industry," a.k.a the Hollywood movie establishment, was "totalitarian." Never mind that Max and Teddy wrote it while sitting out World War II in California, refugees from another species of totalitarianism across the Atlantic. That they found it impossible to distinguish between the vulgarities of American popular culture and the jackboot of Nazism might seem to disqualify them as serious commentators on cultural matters, but to paid-up members of the academic establishment such disabilities have only enhanced their reputations as subtle and penetrating thinkers. In any event, this meditation on culture and feminism was full of choice moments, including a peroration that invited the audience to be "utopian for a moment": "Imagine if you will that gender and queer theorists—for example theorists like Eve Sedgwick—had joined in common with lesbians dishonorably discharged from the military" to influence the way mainstream, heterosexual feminists thought about various pressing public-policy issues.

It would have been instructive, no doubt, to pause with the assembled multitudes to contemplate this bright "utopian" prospect. But it was getting on toward 5:00 P.M., and "The Epistemology of the Queer Classroom: A Roundtable" awaited in an adjoining hotel.

If Walter Benjamin was the most frequently cited author at this year's MLA, "queer" and "queer theory" were among the most frequently used terms of commendation. And if this seems a little. . . well, queer, it is, but not entirely in the old-fashioned, vanilla meaning of the term. What distinguished "The Epistemology of the Queer Classroom" from the many other sessions advertising their queerness was its emphasis on bringing the teacher's sexuality—that is to say, his or her homosexuality—into the classroom as part of what we might call the learning experience. We think that parents of college-age children will be especially interested to learn about some of the pedagogical debates that their tuition dollars help to support.

The first presentation, a joint production read alternately by Thomas Piontek, a professor of English at Ohio State University, and Mary Elliot, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, brooded about the topic of "coming out," a subject on which the two had been working "for quite some time now." Their "research" into this subject dealt with such questions as "When should we come out? Should we come out in a composition classroom? Or only when teaching gay and lesbian literature? Questions like that." Hitherto, "the literature" on coming out had insisted that there was a "political, ethical, and pedagogical imperative" for teachers to declare their sexual orientation. Recently, however, coming out had been criticized as a "totalizing gesture" that creates a "privileged discourse in the classroom" for the teacher. Naturally, one can't go around condoning "totalizing gestures" or "privileged discourses," so Professor Piontek explained that their own approach had evolved "from a hands-on, how-to guide to a more theoretical discussion of the pros and cons of coming out."

For her part, Miss Elliot assured her auditors that even if coming out were no longer the hot topic it once was in gay studies, the recent Republican landslide had brought about the dire situation where "the institution of school prayer" seemed "more likely than the institution of a Rainbow Curriculum." Clearly, this betokened a state of emergency. They concluded by introducing

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a dollop of post-structuralist relativism to the mix. Not only was coming out a "political, ethical and pedagogical imperative"—something that Professor Piontek reaffirmed at the end of his part of the talk—but it was also a means of challenging "truth with a capital 'T'" as well as "the assumption of heterosexuality and the liberal humanist fiction of a universal, objective, impartial position from which one can speak." Anyone who has been paying attention to bulletins from the academy lately knows that about the only thing considered worse than "the assumption of heterosexuality" today is the idea of "a universal, objective, impartial position."

If you are wondering what the alternative to objectivity looks like, Linda Garber, who teaches at California State University, Fresno, provided a good introduction. Professor Garber began by questioning the article "the" in the session's title, "The Epistemology of the Queer Classroom." What she wanted to talk about was the plural, queer classroom*s*, and "different ways of being queer." Above all she wanted to avoid the "false unity implied by a transcendent queerness." To this end, Professor Garber explained, her own queer classroom is informed by her biography and consequently "is feminist; is taught by a white Jewish woman; is taught by a white Jewish woman who is chronically ill; it's an anti-racist classroom." It's also, one can safely conjecture, a classroom from which students emerge with greater exposure to a species of politically correct sexual psycho-drama than to literature.

Believing with Professor Garber that everyone should do his bit to avoid the "false unity implied by a transcendent queerness" (isn't language marvelous?), we left "The Epistemology of the Queer Classroom" to peek into "Henry James and Cultural Criticism." Alas, we missed "'A Queer Confusion of Yearning and Alarm': Disavowing the Family Fiction in James's 'The Pupil.'" But we did hear Priscilla Wald from Columbia University speak about "Frontiers of Identity: 'Daisy Miller' in Cultural Context." Those of you who have not read "Daisy Miller" for a while may have forgotten that the story is partly about the breakdown of gender roles. But that is something that anyone who has spent five minutes at the MLA could have guessed, since the breakdown of traditional gender roles is what every third session seemed to be about.

The annual MLA convention always manages to offer its little surprises, however, and one of the chief surprises for us this year was to discover that the unfortunate woman known as Typhoid Mary "embodies the merging of Daisy Miller and the expatriate woman": both, according to Professor Wald, are "transgressive on many levels," and "embody the threat of the wrong kind of reproduction." If you are wondering how one gets from "Daisy Miller," the story by Henry James, to this grotesque scenario, the answer lies in James's phrase about a "beneficent contagion of contact and communication." There's that word "contagion," you see, a lovely, "transgressive" sort of word that licenses the flight of fancy that Professor Wald delivered to her audience. T. S. Eliot once said that James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. But how could Eliot have foreseen the indignities of the contemporary academy? James himself remains inviolate, of course, but his work has been subject to every imaginable violation as the race-gender-class machine has got to work reducing his exquisite, civilizing prose to the rebarbative vulgarities that pass for criticism in the academy today.

While James's fiction was being made to suffer these indignities at the San Diego Marriott, Virginia Woolf and her writing weren't faring much better next door at the Convention Center. Woolf, though she was herself one of the most literary of twentieth-century writers, is now so fully established in the academy as a feminist cult figure that her acolytes can no longer bring themselves to discuss her work in merely literary terms. She must be seen instead to be a historical colossus, capable of dispensing wisdom and shedding light on whatever worldly problems happen to be nominated for academic

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interest. Thus the program devoted to Woolf on this occasion was called, improbably, "Virginia Woolf: The Constructs of Community in the Contexts of Fascism." It has lately been observed that the last two decades of Woolf's life coincided with the rise of fascism in Europe, and so it is naturally assumed that Woolf must have had something important to tell us about this political phenomenon.

On this program, however, Sigmund Freud loomed rather larger than Adolf Hitler, and one wondered at times if some of the feminists assembled to worship at the Woolf shrine hadn't gotten those two figures confused. Sex, in any case, was the real subject, and the star turn of the session was a paper entitled "Defying the Dic(k)tators from Freud to Fascism: Virginia Woolf and Penis Mockery." It must be acknowledged that its author, Vara Neverow, proved to be gruesomely amusing. Penis mockery was indeed the leitmotif in a presentation that, in the sheer comic viciousness of its sexual humor, resembled a rather specialized night-club act. Professor Neverow is undoubtedly a talent, but literature is not her forte. Recalling that Woolf thought Joyce's *Ulysses* an "ill-bred" book, we shudder to think of how she would have characterized this protracted discussion of "dicks," dictators, and other matters more or less irrelevant to the books she actually wrote.

It should not be thought that this afternoon's panoply of feminist, Marxist, gay, and new-historicist critical methodologies exhausted the radical professoriat's means of avoiding literature. By no means. When it comes to slighting literature in favor of a political agenda, professors of literature have shown themselves to be endlessly inventive. Yet another gambit was on view this evening with "Teaching the Political Conflicts." The MLA organizers had clearly anticipated a large turnout for this special session, for it was booked into a huge room at the San Diego Marriott. In the event, the room was about half full. The session was organized by Donald Lazere, a dependably earnest Marxist who teaches at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and who is a fixture at the annual MLA conventions. "Teaching the Political Conflicts" featured comments by Gerald Graff from the University of Chicago and the Marxist economist Richard Ohmann from Wesleyan University. Richard Marius, who teaches at Harvard, was unable to attend, but he sent along a prepared talk that Professor Lazere read aloud. Linda Brodkey, a self-advertised "post-structuralist" teacher of composition at the University of California, San Diego, concluded with some seemingly interminable remarks that in their studied irrelevancy might be described as aggressively, even ostentatiously, post-structuralist.

Professor Graff has the dubious distinction of coining the phrase "teaching the conflicts." What it comes down to is this: people have criticized left-wing academics for politicizing the humanities. Instead of answering those criticisms, Professor Graff came up with the idea of incorporating the whole debate over the curriculum into the curriculum. According to him, "teaching the conflicts" solves the problem of "how to teach political literacy without indoctrination." For example, instead of teaching Shakespeare, one might teach the various ways that contemporary academics try to cut Shakespeare down to size by finding (say) sexist or Eurocentric or racist or imperialist themes in his plays. If there is a controversy over whether to teach *Rambo* or Rimbaud (an example that Professor Graff has used), one should not decide this controversy but teach it, lining up the arguments in favor of both. Professor Graff claims to believe that this approach helps students "enter the arena of debate" without predetermining the stance they will take on the substantive issues.

Probably the best response to Professor Graff's proposal was set forth by the philosopher John Searle a few years ago in *The New York Review of Books*. In the first place, Professor Searle noted, what Professor Graff envisions is "second order. It is teaching about teaching rather than teaching about first-order subject matter." Moreover, the

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controversies that he would have us place at the center of academic study are either narrowly political (e.g., the question of whether *The Tempest* endorses an imperialist script) or simply ephemeral (e.g., the question of whether to study *Rambo* or Rimbaud will evaporate as *Rambo* is quickly forgotten and the poetry of Rimbaud lives on). What is left out when we focus on teaching the conflicts is—everything: instead of reading Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, the student reads up on contemporary debates about whether it is really worth reading them. In the meantime, the semester ends and he leaves that class no more knowledgeable than when he entered it.

The astonishing thing about "teaching the conflicts" is that people have continued to take the idea seriously in the five or six years since Professor Graff first formulated it. If he were really in earnest about equipping students to enter the "arena of debate," Professor Graff should insist that students avoid classes that "teach the conflicts" and concentrate instead on mastering Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and as much of the traditional literary canon as they could. Then at least they would know what they were talking about. And then they could enter the debate aware that many of the current "controversies" are little more than attempts to destroy literary studies by transforming them into a battleground for one or another political agenda.

This was something that Richard Marius recognized in the paper he sent in to be read. Although he began by declaring his liberal credentials, Professor Marius took sharp issue with Professor Graff's proposals. A teacher's goal, he wrote, should be to keep his politics out of the classroom; the ideal was a "detached study of texts" in which reason, not politics, determined the course of argument. Professor Marius represented the voice of traditional liberalism—a distinctly minority position at the MLA convention. Richard Ohmann was one of many representing the voice of radical Marxism. In his view, teaching the conflicts would be a fine thing—if only it worked. Professor Ohmann expatiated at some length about this, but what we found most interesting in his presentation was his frank acknowledgment that the college curriculum had been transformed by the radicalism of the 1960s. "Feminism, black studies, cultural studies, history from below, lesbian and gay studies, Marxism"—such areas of study, he noted, were not present in the curriculum three decades ago. Today, the "critical legacy of the Sixties" is present in humanities departments "almost everywhere." Of course, this has often been pointed out in the pages of *The New Criterion*, only to be greeted by a chorus of denials from the academic establishment. It was refreshing, then, to encounter such plain speaking at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. It was not, we were to discover, a common occurrence.

Wednesday, December 28

Ten-fifteen on Wednesday promised to be an exciting time at the MLA convention. One could choose among such sessions as "Feminism and the Unspeakable" (Part II), "The Politics, Ethics, and Erotics of Collaborative Scholarship," and "Women and Gender in Islamic Discourse." But the MLA had organized a press briefing to discuss the results of its national survey on "What's Being Taught in Survey Courses?" and so, reluctantly, we forsook pleasure for duty and went to the sparsely populated press briefing.

The MLA's new survey tabulated the results of a questionnaire that was sent to some five hundred English-department chairmen asking them to name the five most frequently taught authors in lower-division survey courses in 1990–91. According to a press release, "the MLA findings suggest that authors and periods considered to be part of the 'traditional' English literature canon continue to maintain a strong presence in undergraduate survey courses." There followed a number of reassuring statistics: Chaucer was named by 89 percent of those questioned, Shakespeare by 77.7 percent, Milton by 71.7 percent, and so on.

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"Reassuring," in fact, was a word that cropped up often in the press briefing. Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the MLA, noted that the "findings should really be reassuring to parents of college-age students" because it showed that "traditional authors continue to be the mainstay" of English survey courses. It is true, Miss Franklin allowed, that "works by newly recognized and contemporary authors are making their way into the curriculum," but this represented a process of "evolution, not revolution." This was a theme echoed by Patricia Meyer Spacks, the outgoing president of the MLA, chairman of the English department at the University of Virginia, and the author of books about gossip and (most recently) boredom. The MLA's survey was undertaken, she said, "to see whether it was true, as some people have suggested, that the great literature of the Western canon was disappearing from the curriculum of our colleges and universities." Her conclusion: this was "demonstrably not the case." Furthermore, Professor Spacks said, the reason that many more black and women authors (for example) are showing up on reading lists is "not political" but "historical," having to do with "the sense that history is or can be a lot larger, a lot more inclusive than it was once thought to be."

Hmmm. We hardly know where to begin to criticize the MLA's survey. Some minor objections include the fact that it is out of date (things have gotten a lot worse in the academy since 1990–91) and that limiting the response to five authors was bound to skew the results. About the "reassuring" statistics derived from the survey, we recall Disraeli's description of the three kinds of lies: Lies, damned lies, and statistics. What do the statistics compiled by the MLA, even assuming they are accurate, tell us? Precious little. For the issue is not only whether Spenser or Shakespeare or Milton shows up on lower-level reading lists, but also the way in which these authors are taught. Teaching Shakespeare as an exemplar of Western imperialism and patriarchy is not the sort of "reassurance" that most parents or state legislatures would welcome as they contemplate the future cost of higher education. But the whole question of teaching practices was deliberately excluded from the survey, the official responsible for the survey explained, because collecting data on it was "not feasible." That may be true; but far from being reassuring, it simply shows up the worthlessness of the survey—except, that is, as a public-relations blind.

Where was Richard Ohmann when one needed him? At least he admitted that the curriculum had been transformed by the radical ethos of the 1960s. When asked whether she was "actually suggesting that these curriculum changes do not reflect the pressures . . . by Afro-American cultural politics, feminist cultural politics, gay cultural politics," etc., Professor Spacks temporized: the changes were not political, she said, because "one sense of intellectual possibility and intellectual demand comes out of a cultural context, and the cultural context is established by everything that is happening in the culture. But it seems to me very important to realize that this is not a matter of identity politics." No, we didn't get it either. But this verbal arabesque did give us some insight into one reason that Professor Spacks might have been elected to the presidency of the MLA. At a time when the organization is under increasing scrutiny and criticism, having a president who is adept at such smoke signals is a valuable asset.

We thought back to her accomplished performance that evening during her presidential address, piquantly entitled "So What?", Professor Spacks's main points concerned the fate of her profession: the widespread attacks on the MLA and the profession as a whole, the dearth of jobs for graduate students, the dwindling of state and federal monies for higher education. In essence, she attempted to suggest some answers to the taunting question "So what?" by outlining the reasons that an education in literature is important.

Professor Spacks said both interesting and opaque things about this subject. But perhaps the most illuminating part of her talk

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came early on, when she described the eight-hour course in media training she had taken a few years ago when she became an officer of the MLA. The point of the course was to teach her "how to function effectively on a talk show," and the primary advice was to "figure out in advance no more than two things you want to say and say them over and over again, no matter what you're asked." Professor Spacks noted that she had found the advice quite useful, and, thinking back to the way she handled the press briefing, we can see why.

Unlike some of her recent predecessors in the presidency of the MLA, Professor Spacks is not a malevolent figure. Indeed, she struck us as kindly and basically well intentioned. But she was also clearly out of touch with what is really going on in the name of the teaching of literature today. It was clear from her talk that she still believed that literature was a primary interest of those teachers affiliated with the MLA. What session after session at the convention made unmistakably clear, however, was that for many in the profession, literature had long since been overtaken by some version of cultural radicalism as their real passion.

One of the most disturbing illustrations of this tendency is the spectacle of intellectual irresponsibility exhibited by the squads of literature and cultural studies professors who have lately presumed to deconstruct or otherwise criticize the natural sciences. The pretentiousness and cognitive bankruptcy of the profession declares itself here in its rawest and most preposterous form.

Of course, there have long been humanists who, innocent of science, have been ensorcelled by the bracing, existential sound of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle," the specter of "entropy," the theory of relativity, and kindred, half-understood scientific concepts. A great deal of muddle-headed social theory has thus come into the world. In recent years, however, this attraction to portentous-sounding abstractions ("chaos theory," "paradigm shift," etc.) has been wedded to various radical literary and political theories to produce a whole new genre of nonsense, generally known as "science studies." Here we see the antics of deconstruction, post-structuralism, and gender madness applied not to literary or other cultural texts but to the basic concepts and methodology of the natural sciences. The result is almost invariably a form of political gibberish: rantings about "feminist algebra" (yes, really), the applicability of Jacques Derrida to chaos theory in physics, and so on.

Last year, two scientists, Paul R. Gross from the University of Virginia and Norman Levitt from Rutgers University, published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*.[2] *Higher Superstition* is a blistering attack on the whole field of "science studies," by turns hilarious and disconcerting. But it is much more than a polemic. By providing a patiently assembled and minutely analyzed catalogue of absurdities, the book is perhaps the most trenchant and carefully argued attack on intellectual fraudulence in the humanities to have appeared in our time.

And so it was only natural that there should have been a session devoted to attacking *Higher Superstition* at the MLA. Entitled "Who Qualifies to Critique Science?" it was an extremely popular and, in its way, instructive session. Presided over by George Levine, a minor but dependable champion of various left-wing academic causes who teaches at Rutgers University, the session featured three speakers: Sharon Traweek and N. Katherine Hayles from UCLA, and—one of the few academic "stars" to appear at this year's MLA convention—Andrew Ross, a relentlessly trendy young Marxist who recently left Princeton to minister to the proletariat at New York University.

Intellectually, the session was vapid; politically, it was vicious. Professor Levine began by deriding *Higher Superstition* as "wildly reductive" and "absurd"; Professor

2 See "When Reason Sleeps: The Academy vs. Science," in our issue for May 1994, for a review of this book.

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Ross described it as "a leaden-footed, pigheaded attack in the tradition of Bennett, Bloom, Kimball, Kramer, de Souza, Bernstein, and the other Bloom" (i.e., Harold Bloom, as distinct from Allan); Professor Hayles spoke of Professor Gross and Levitt's "distortions and misrepresentations," their "doubletalk," etc. It is worth noting that Professor Hayles and Ross were both eviscerated in *Higher Superstition*—Professor Hayles for her appositely titled book *Chaos Bound*, Andrew Ross for *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*, a work that Professor Ross dedicated to "all of the science teachers I never had. It could only have been written without them." It is also worth noting that neither Professor Gross nor Levitt was invited to respond to the attacks made on them and their book. Indeed, when someone from the audience asked whether anyone representing an alternative viewpoint had been invited to participate, Professor Levine snapped "No!"—adding for good measure that, having had unpleasant encounters with Professor Levitt at Rutgers, he would have nothing to do with him.

It would be bootless to describe the "content" of this session in any detail: really, there wasn't any. There was only pose, attitude, political ventilation. Professor Traweek provided an exegesis of *My Fair Lady* as a paradigm of what is wrong with scientific rationality, while Professor Ross intoned darkly about the "occupying presence of technoscience in all of the institutional spaces that house our intellectual work today." Professor Hayles made feeble protestations that she really did know some science and that she and others had been treated unfairly in *Higher Superstition*.

Although there is stiff competition for the prize, we are tempted to award the palm for the most aggressively bogus session to Professor Levine and his colleagues. There was plenty of politicized drivel in other sessions, to be sure, but in raising the question "Who Qualifies to Critique Science?", Professor Levine *et al.* at least raised an important topic. Indeed, the importance of responsible science policy is something that Professors Gross and Levitt acknowledge early on in their book:

> We recognize that it is necessary for science patiently to abide social scrutiny, since science and its uses affect the prospects of the entire society. That kind of scrutiny is a serious enterprise, requiring painstaking attention to fact and a disinclination to extrapolate beyond the bounds of reasonable inference.

The problem of course is that far from observing a "painstaking attention to fact" and cultivating a "disinclination to extrapolate beyond the bounds of reasonable inference," the "scholars" that Professor Levine assembled barely acknowledge that such a thing as a fact exists. Consequently, their "critique" of science is little more than an anemic fiction: a few important-sounding technical phrases ornamented with portentous left-wing clichés and fashionable Lit-Crit talk. There were a lot of silly sessions at the MLA; "Who Qualifies to Critique Science?" was a scandal.

Thursday, December 29

At this point, it would be *de trop*, not to say unkind, to subject readers to précis of "Feminism and the Unspeakable" (Part III), "The Cultural Logic of Late Catholicism," or the other treats featured on Thursday. Part of the tedium of attending an MLA convention is the stupefying sameness of the sessions. Yet we must include at least a word about the session called "Homi Bhabha: The Location of Culture," which convened in a large ballroom in the Hyatt Regency on Thursday afternoon. Homi Bhabha, who recently went to the University of Chicago from the University of Sussex, is one of the brightest stars in the newish field of "post-colonial" studies. He is a frequent contributor to *October* magazine and, unlike Andrew Ross, who is merely fashionable, Professor Bhabha has a real *following*. Interestingly, he made his international debut at the MLA in 1983, reading a paper called "Of

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Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse."

Professor Bhabha's new book of essays, *The Location of Culture*, was the occasion for this gathering, but what we saw was less like a scholarly panel than a political rally. The Manchester Ballroom was packed to overflowing with hundreds of eager celebrants; each participant arose to praise Homi Bhabha's brilliance and political rectitude (nearly always with appropriate invocations of Walter Benjamin) and then Homi Bhabha himself delivered an extraordinary political pep talk. Having read a bit of Professor Bhabha's work, a forbidding mixture of post-structuralist jargon and anti-white racial animus, we were stunned by his charismatic presentation. The words were just as forbidding, just as rebarbative; but Professor Bhabha is a ferociously articulate performer, and he had his audience in the palm of his hand. There was great deal said about "the struggle against fascism" at that session. Yet the demagoguery we witnessed on this occasion seemed like nothing so much as a rehearsal of totalitarian rhetoric. Once again, literature had been left far, far behind.

Literature was indeed the principal casualty of this convention. At almost every turn we encountered an open and agreed-upon hostility to it, and on the rare programs where it was discussed as anything but a disguised form of malign political repression or a "text" for some variety of "transgressive" sexuality, it was either derided, condescended to, or openly attacked. Altogether typical of this animus was the unlovely spectacle of Professor Marjorie Perloff delivering an assault on the life and work of Philip Larkin, whose poems were dismissed as "strange cartoons" and the man himself as "paranoid." And Professor Perloff's tirade was relatively benign compared to that of Professor Joyce Ann Joyce, who in the course of praising the writings of Ishmael Reed and denouncing those of Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, repeatedly declaimed to her largely black audience that "racism, sexism, capitalism, and the Judeo-Christian tradition" were responsible for what she characterized as the troubled "interpersonal relationships between black men and women." And this was on one of the more literary programs at the convention.

But on a great many of the programs the speakers did not pretend to be interested in literature even as a point of departure, and the audiences for non-literary subjects—"Free Speech and Hate Speech in the Classroom," for example, or a discourse on "the geometry of lesbian desire" as illustrated on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (the magazine, of course, not the novel)—were invariably the largest and most enthusiastic. At the "Free Speech and Hate Speech" session, a speaker from Oberlin denounced the college's "absolutist defense of the First Amendment" as an offense against multiculturalism, and also, not incidentally, deplored what she termed "heterosexualism." At a great many sessions, moreover, more attention was lavished upon the vaunted iniquities of California's Proposition 187 than upon any "text" even remotely related to literary study.

It was all a terrible confirmation of Lionel Trilling's prophetic diagnosis, more than twenty years ago, of "a once proud profession [that] has come to the end of its tether." Whether the profession can still be saved from this suicidal plunge into radical politics and sexual nihilism remains to be seen. The formation of an opposition group—the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics—is one of the few signs that it might. But whatever fate awaits the literature-teaching profession in this country, one thing is now certain: It is the Modern Language Society itself which has come to the end of its tether, and with this report we bid it farewell. It has fully succeeded in rendering itself irrelevant to the real world of literary and humanistic study. It has established itself as a menace to the very standards it pretends to uphold. It is now just another example of decadent cultural bureaucracy more concerned to perpetuate its own prerogatives than to discharge the intellectual responsibilities for which it was created. Its time has passed.

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Sons & husbands: D. H. Lawrence in love

by Paul Dean

When, in 1917, D. H. Lawrence published a book of poems about his early married life entitled *Look! We Have Come Through!*, Bertrand Russell remarked, "I am glad they have come through but why should I look?" Brenda Maddox tells us why: because an understanding of Lawrence's marriage is central to an understanding of his achievements as a writer.[1] The unsatisfactory nature of his own parents' marriage is notorious, while his wife's first marriage, to his modern-languages professor at Nottingham University College, was a humdrum alliance made tolerable only by her frequent adulteries. An ideal of marriage was, for both of them, something to be created from scratch, not copied on an existing model. Yet in the last year of his life, Lawrence could produce, in *A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover,"* one of the greatest hymns to marriage that was ever written—certainly a finer work than the novel which was its occasion, the novel which, unfortunately, many people still assume is Lawrence's most characteristic.

A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover" is a good place to begin, considering the theme of Mrs. Maddox's new biography of Lawrence. (Her failure to mention it is therefore all the more surprising.) Contending against Descartes, as he had done all his life, that "all the emotions belong to the body, and are only recognised by the mind," Lawrence distinguishes between "mental feelings" (the cerebral approach he had satirized in the character Hermione Roddice, in *Women in Love*) and "real feelings," that is, feelings apprehended by mind-and-body. Twentieth-century human beings have been conditioned into living with the top halves of their bodies only, shunning emotional honesty, valuing craven propriety. Sex to modern youth means "a lady's underclothing, and the fumbling therewith." This is the essential savagery, Lawrence says—it is genuinely pornographic, whereas those who think his novel pornographic have misread it. After a marvelously witty dismissal of Bernard Shaw ("To him, all sex is infidelity, and only infidelity is sex"), Lawrence urges a rehabilitation of marriage as the greatest legacy of the Christian faith, an act of religious communion, certainly phallocentric, but ranging far beyond the sexual act in its significance:

> A man and a woman are new to one another throughout a life-time, in the rhythm of marriage that matches the rhythm of the year. . . . Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and the setting of the sun, and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and the equinox! This is what is the matter with us. We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the Tree of Life,

1 *D. H. Lawrence: The Story of a Marriage*, by Brenda Maddox; Simon & Schuster, 620 pages, $30.

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> and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.

That last marvelous touch reminds us how much Lawrence owes to Blake.

To pose again the basic question: how did Lawrence achieve this exalted conception of marriage? Some of the psychological impulses were there from the beginning. Mrs. Maddox has a revealing anecdote of Lawrence as an adolescent, crying "Murderer!" if someone trod on a flower during a country walk. The instinctive reverence for life in all its forms (again like Blake, who said, "Every thing that lives is holy") was always in his nature. And while his parents' marriage was largely an admonitory instance, there was his own relationship with his mother to draw upon. Mrs. Maddox wisely makes no attempt to cover ground which has been definitively examined by John Worthen in *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years, 1885–1912* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), beginning her own narrative in 1908 with Lawrence's arrival in London to take up his first, and as things turned out his only, professional teaching post. By that time his mother had only two years to live, and all the raw material for *Sons and Lovers*, apart from the experience of her death, was behind him. But no account of Lawrence's attitude to marriage can ignore the intensity of his feelings for his mother, which so closely corresponds to the spiritual communing he celebrates in *A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover"* and elsewhere, and to which there was no real equivalent in his actual marriage. It was to his mother, on her deathbed, that he addressed a poem entitled "The Bride":

> My love looks like a girl to-night
> But she is old.
> The plaits that lie along her pillow
> Are not gold,
> But threaded with filigree silver,
> And uncanny cold.

And Jessie Chambers (Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*) tells us, in her invaluable *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (1936), that after his mother's death Lawrence said to her, "I've always loved mother . . . I've *loved* her, like a lover. That's why I could never love you." Jessie Chambers leaves us in no doubt about her view of the struggle Lawrence did not succeed in impersonalizing through art: "In *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence handed his mother the laurels of victory." At that time he had not read Freud—and when he did he pronounced psychoanalysis "irreverent and destructive," a warning Mrs. Maddox might have heeded more often. He had, however, read Sophocles—but, most important, he had lived through that deep emotional attachment. Literature might falsify: experience remained.

Such, then, was the young man who met Frieda Weekley in 1912. He had behind him an abandoned affair with Jessie Chambers; a broken engagement to an old friend, Louie Burrows; and a continuing affair with a married woman, Alice Dax, who was in part the model for Clara Dawes in *Sons and Lovers*. But, while superficially "experienced," he lacked self-assurance and emotional maturity, still unable to emancipate himself from his love for his dead mother. Frieda wasted little time on small talk; according to one well-authenticated story, she was in bed with him within twenty minutes of meeting him. A German baroness, indulged during childhood, vivacious and uninhibited, Frieda had married Ernest Weekley, whom she had met when he was holidaying in the Black Forest in 1899. After some years of stability and happiness she became the mistress of Otto Gross, one of the first and most brilliant of Freud's disciples. When Frieda bedded Lawrence she was acting on her belief that "if only sex were 'free,' the world would straight-away turn into a paradise." Lawrence, as it happened, did not believe in free sex, or, in that sense, in freedom itself. "Thank God I am not free," he once exclaimed, "any more than a rooted tree is free." Though he was initially overwhelmed by Frieda, the combination was volatile, the omens unpropitious. According to her account of that first meeting, in her

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lively but unreliable autobiography *Not I, but the Wind* (1934), "we talked of Oedipus and understanding leaped through our words"—a textbook example of irony. In *Mr. Noon*, the unfinished novel which documents the first four months of the relationship with scrupulous accuracy, the character representing Frieda is made to say, "There isn't a man worth having, nowadays, who can get away from his mother." Lawrence, nonetheless, took the first steps. He ended his affair with Alice Dax and accompanied Frieda to Metz, where he met her family and was astounded by Baroness von Richthofen's phlegmatic acceptance of her daughter's adulteries. Without Frieda's consent he dispatched to Professor Weekley a letter informing him of the situation in a wholly characteristic way: "Certainly if there is any real wrong being done I am doing it, but I think there is not." Weekley, not surprisingly, could not concur. He exercised his legal right to deprive Frieda of access to her children, thereby, Mrs. Maddox argues, determining much of the subsequent unhappiness: "The tragedy of the Lawrences' marriage was their incomprehension of each other's greatest sadness—his loss of his mother, hers of her children." Lawrence himself described the children as "the drawn sword between us."

From this point the story wanders all over the world as the Lawrences shuttled between England, Italy, Ceylon, Australia, Mexico, France, and other places. Yet they were never the rootless nomads of his short story "Things." They had their center in each other, and in being true to themselves. Never was the spirit of place more wonderfully captured than in Lawrence's travel writings and in his fiction (the supreme example here being *Kangaroo*, which creates Australia from the inside on the basis of six weeks' work). Wherever Lawrence was on the globe, he was always Lawrence; whatever the vicissitudes of the marriage (as it formally became in 1914), it was an essential life-source for them both. Yet one cannot but be struck by the sense of exile and destructiveness as one reads of their peregrinations and their violent arguments, which frequently ended in physical attacks. Both these points bear further examination.

Nineteen-fourteen was a turning-point in their fortunes. *Sons and Lovers* had been well reviewed, Lawrence was writing some of his best short stories and working on *The Sisters*, the enormous work which was to bifurcate into *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. (Dismissive, already, of the "hard, violent style full of sensation and presentation" of *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence claimed, only half-mischievously, that *The Sisters* was "a novel in a foreign language.") Yet when *The Rainbow* was published, in 1915, it was swiftly banned as indecent, whilst *Women in Love* was rejected by publishers. The outbreak of war added to unwelcome attentions already aroused in the media by Frieda's divorce from Weekley and marriage to Lawrence; her German origins made them targets of harassment and indignities recorded in the chapter of *Kangaroo* called "The Nightmare." Lawrence was never in danger of being called up; his poor health saw to that. He still had to cope with taunts directed at himself and his wife.

"Something happened to Lawrence between *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*," Mrs. Maddox claims; that something being that "he lost his faith in the healing power of married love." Frieda's sexual appetite had always been more voracious than his and she had had lovers since they met; in addition, he set great store on the achievement of simultaneous orgasm, which had so far proved impossible between them. During 1917, Mrs. Maddox believes, Lawrence briefly took a male lover, a farm worker called William Hocking, whom he met while staying in Cornwall with Frieda. This, if true, is of some importance, though not as much as Mrs. Maddox seems to think. In *A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover,"* Lawrence was to write of homosexuality in a tone of calm acceptance:

> The essential blood-contact is between man and woman, always has been so, always will be.

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> The contact of positive sex. The homosexual contacts are secondary, even if not merely substitutes of exasperated reaction from the utterly unsatisfactory nervous sex between men and women.

Is he, in that last comment, recalling personal experience? Certainly Frieda told Middleton Murry years later, "I think the homosexuality in him was a short phase out of misery—I fought him and won." Certainly, too, Maurice Magnus, the companion of Norman Douglas whose escapades in Italy Lawrence immortalized in his introduction to Magnus's *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion* (1924)—one of Lawrence's best, and least-known, pieces of writing—stated in a letter to Douglas, published here for the first time, that Lawrence "is looking for bisexual types *for himself*." This was in 1920, when the Hocking episode, if any, was in the past. Against all this one has to set Lawrence's disgust at the homosexuality fashionable among a certain set in Cambridge ("It is so wrong . . . as if it came from deep inward dirt—a sort of sewer"). But the casual flippancy and promiscuity with which such relationships were practiced would have appalled Lawrence in any case. I am inclined to accept that he did have some limited homosexual experience and that this colored, without necessarily causing, his depiction of the relationship between Gerald Crich and Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love*, a blood-brothership which had successors in *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo*. What his own experiments may have contributed is the question mark inevitably placed over the feasibility of such relationships. After Gerald and Birkin have wrestled together, in the chapter "Gladiatorial," Gerald asks, "Is this the Brüderschaft you wanted?" Birkin replies "Perhaps. Do you think this pledges anything?" "I don't know." What the reader sees, ultimately if not at this point, is that between the sensitive, self-doubting Birkin, with his capacity for growth and emotional development, and Gerald, whose spiritual world is the unyielding fastness of the Alpine snow, no real intimacy can exist.

The sense of alienation—from conventional society, from the metropolitan literary world, from himself—may have been a factor in Lawrence's violent behavior toward Frieda. The disparity between his preaching of sexually fulfilled marriage and his practice is routinely sniggered at by his detractors, who never, apparently, stop to count up how many great writers they can think of who have had blissfully happy marriages. Nevertheless, to those who do not know the story already, the scenes detailed by Mrs. Maddox, in which virulent abuse is the norm, throwing of physical objects passes without comment, and physical assault is not infrequent, will come as a shock. There is a representative quarrel reported by Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield, which began as a disagreement about Shelley and developed into a full-scale fight, Lawrence repeatedly slapping Frieda across the face. Yet the next morning "the startled Murrys saw Lawrence taking Frieda breakfast in bed and making her a hat while she wove flowers into her hair." As late as 1922, in Mexico, Lawrence made an extraordinary scene in a restaurant because he objected to Frieda smoking:

> "Take it out, I say, you sniffing bitch!" And then, though she was seated behind a corner table, half hidden from everyone by the cloth, "There you sit with that thing in your mouth and your legs open to every man in the room! And you wonder why no decent woman in England would have anything to do with you!"

This comes from an eyewitness account. One is prompted to reflect that it flatters the anti-smoking lobby only to fall foul of feminism, and to wonder, not without a certain naughty glee, what sort of public figure Lawrence would cut nowadays. Everyone wondered, at the time, why Frieda endured such treatment (though she didn't always). It is not really good enough to reply that she was dependent on him, having no social position in England. The truth may be as simple as that, for all these indefensible

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rages, she admitted that she needed him—indeed, could not bear to be parted from him. The most obvious reflection, as one reads of these arguments and attacks, is that Lawrence never entirely ceased to be influenced by the role model of his father. When Arthur Lawrence finally met his daughter-in-law, in 1917, his reaction was comically memorable: "When 'er oppens 'er mahth, 'aif room's dark. 'Er's like a damn girt cart-oss." The miner may not have been a literary man but he knew a formidable animal when he saw one. His son was not so easily daunted. What unplumbable complexities of feeling lie behind his statement to Dorothy Brett in 1926—"You have no idea . . . how humiliating it is to beat a woman"?

A greater amount of wry self-awareness underlies his confession, "I love trying things and discovering how I hate them." The last eight years of his life were filled with wandering into many countries, in search of a climate favorable to his health (Mrs. Maddox quips that there was only one taboo word to him: "tuberculosis") and of a social order more amenable than that in England. He found neither. This last period is difficult for Lawrence's admirers because two of the major works that it nurtured—*Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*—engage with political and religious issues and with racial theory in ways which are both silly and offensive. That Lawrence's political antennae could be acute cannot be doubted by anyone who has read "A Letter from Germany" (1924):

> There is a sense of danger. It is not the people. They don't seem dangerous. Out of the very air comes a sense of danger, a queer, *bristling* feeling of uncanny danger.
>
> Something has happened. Something has happened which has not yet eventuated. The old spell of the old world has broken, and the old, bristling, savage spirit has set in.

In *Kangaroo*, also, the analysis of the political situation is highly intelligent; Mrs. Maddox gives evidence that Lawrence had contacts with underground movements during his brief stay in Australia, and that consequently the novel gives a more accurate picture of how things were than used to be thought. Yet against this must be set a lamentably large amount of nonsense, and some shrill assertions about preserving the supremacy of the white races which one can scarcely believe Lawrence capable of making. At least he was consistent; in his marriage, too, he believed in dictatorships. True, the novels contain critiques of his own position, and even his unacceptable views stem from his commitment to the uniqueness of the individual as opposed to the undifferentiated mass of people. But one has to admit that his intelligence was disabled in this area, and to agree with Mrs. Maddox in seeing some unresolved psychological struggle.

"Struggle" is a key word in Lawrence's life and fiction. In his preface to *Women in Love* (unpublished until 1936), he draws attention to that theme and to its stylistic consequences for him—

> In point of style, fault is often found with the continual, slightly modified repetition. The only answer is that it is natural to the author: and that every natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, frictional to-and-fro, which works up to culmination.

In this rare reflection on his own style (which shows that it was a conscious choice, not carelessness as those complain who have no ear for prose rhythm), Lawrence also discloses a fundamental truth about his approach to life. Out of the agon of his marriage came renewal; his symbol was not the Phoenix for nothing. He says in *A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover"*: "Men experience the great rhythm of emotion man-wise, women experience it woman-wise, and in the unison of men and women it is complete." Many of Frieda's comments suggest her agreement with this division between male and female experience. She wrote Samuel Koteliansky that, however great a figure Lawrence might be in the world of men—undeniably dwarfing her—there was

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another world, "a deeper one, where life itself flows, there I am at home!"

Lawrence's last years are crowded with struggles of various kinds: over publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, over the exhibition of his paintings (which were banned and seen again only in 1989, when, alas, they were revealed to be embarrassingly bad), and over censorship of his book of poems *Pansies* (an anglicization, he ingenuously insisted, of *Pensées*). Above all, he waged an unremitting fight against disease. As it became clear that this was a fight he would not win, he produced some of his greatest poems:

> Give me a flower on a tall stem, and three dark flames,
> for I will go to the wedding, and be wedding-guest
> at the marriage of the living dark.
> ("Bavarian Gentians")

> Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
> and the long journey towards oblivion.
>
> The apples falling like great drops of dew
> to bruise themselves an exit from themselves.
> ("The Ship of Death")

Like Shakespeare's Claudio he might say, "I will encounter darkness as a bride/ And hug it in mine arms." Did he remember the thoughts he had given Paul Morel at the end of *Sons and Lovers*?

> Where was he?—one tiny upright speck of flesh, less than an ear of wheat lost in the field. He could not bear it. On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so tiny a speck, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct. Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror and holding each other in embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all and left them tiny and daunted. So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing.

Lawrence died on March 2, 1930, in Venice, at the age of forty-four. On the morning of his death he had been reading, fittingly, a book about Christopher Columbus.

The story of Frieda's life after Lawrence is swiftly told. Ignored or slighted in the obituary notices, she went to stay with Angelo Ravagli, whom the Lawrences had met in Italy in 1926 and who had rapidly become her lover. They married in 1950, in America (neither Ravagli's divorce from his previous wife nor his marriage to Frieda was valid in Italian law). She countered early biographies of Lawrence with her own story, *Not I, but the Wind*. Lawrence had made no will, and there were the inevitable wrangles over manuscripts and copyright (Frieda was awarded the entire estate in a legal ruling, causing further bitterness to the Lawrence family). There were unseemly squabbles over Lawrence's ashes, exhumed in 1935 for re-burial in New Mexico; Mrs. Maddox, citing a conversation by Ravagli in 1956, suggests that, in fact, the ashes were scattered in Italy and that someone else's repose in Taos. During World War II Frieda and Ravagli, as enemy aliens, were investigated by the FBI, and her application for American citizenship was withdrawn when it became clear that she would be impertinently interrogated about her past. She became, as Mrs. Maddox puts it, "an object of pilgrimage" for Lawrence scholars and other devotees from all over the world. In 1952, on a visit to England, she was driven past the house in London where Ernest Weekley, then aged seventy-seven, still lived; they did not meet. It was on her own seventy-seventh birthday, in 1956, that she died, following a stroke three days previously. Mrs. Maddox quotes, in closing, Frieda's challenge to Koteliansky's sneer that she had been unworthy of Lawrence: "His life and his writing was one —and I say to everybody who wants to have *anything* to do with him or me: hats off to our relationship! Bring off the same if you can!"

Mrs. Maddox gives us an unforgettable impression of the contradictoriness—in positive form, multifacetedness—which made

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up Lawrence's personality, and her treatment of Frieda is perceptive and fair-minded. So much of Lawrence's amazing output has had to be merely glanced at, or ignored, in this review; his travel writing, his essays, his poems and plays, his literary criticism, his short stories, which, at their best, are more polished works of art than his novels. Although he died over sixty years ago it is ridiculous to think of him as belonging to literary history; how can he, when he is more alive than most of our great living novelists? Nor can there be any doubt, if one is constrained to choose, about the reason for his continuing importance: he is our supreme genius in the depiction of the relationships between men and women, and of all his novels *Women in Love*, the freest from unevenness in the writing, is his greatest work. To that we must return again and again; but we can ignore nothing that he wrote. To learn to read him is a lifetime's work, and is both hazardous and difficult. "Whoever reads me," he said once, "will be in the thick of the scrimmage, and if he doesn't like it—if he wants a safe seat in the audience—let him read somebody else." Or, as a final challenge and warning, let us ponder his conversation with Frieda's son Monty, whom he met unexpectedly in 1926 and who worked in the Victoria and Albert Museum:

> "It is a safe job," Monty said, proudly telling his stepfather of his museum work. "Remember," Lawrence replied, fastening on the young man his bluest gaze, "only the dead are safe."

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Margaret Fuller, the American Minerva

by James W. Tuttleton

"Let them be sea-captains, if you will!" Thus cried Margaret Fuller in launching the idea of equality of work opportunity in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Would that she had been a sea-captain herself. In 1850 this pioneering feminist—and her husband and child—were drowned off the coast of Fire Island through the male mismanagement of the ship on which they were returning from Europe.

Some women of course can be; and some want to be; but whether they *should* be sea-captains (or, gloriously, first mates) is a highly charged question which yet remains unsettled a century and a half later. Are there some tasks which women should forbid themselves, even if equality-of-opportunity laws do not? Probably so. Americans are on the whole, I venture to say, made quite uneasy at the spectacle of foreign women in combat fatigues, with AK-47 assault rifles, flak jackets, and a sling of hand grenades. This is no doubt a vestige of the idea that woman is the weaker vessel, needs protection herself, and shouldn't be obliged, violently, to provide it. But more than a relic of defunct chivalry may be at issue here, and the Pentagon generals, when they talk about the national security, play an evasive game about the physical stamina, psychological grit, and combat adequacy of female troops under fire. The recent death of navy pilot Kara Hultgreen, whose plane crashed last October on a carrier landing, has merely raised anew questions that Margaret Fuller tried long ago to settle by exhortation and fiat.

Largely innocent of these doubts, or hostile to them, are a number of recent biographies of this formidable nineteenth-century feminist.[1] The new flurry of biographical publication is doubtless the result of a recent splendid edition of her correspondence, *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, edited by Robert N. Hudspeth and published by Cornell University Press. The first five volumes of this edition appeared in 1983 but then stopped abruptly. The correspondence of the last period of Miss Fuller's life—which she spent in Italy while living with the Marquis Ossoli, bearing his child, and fighting for the Risorgimento—took longer to produce. Professor Hudspeth wished to add newly discovered letters, prepare a corrigendum, and index the letters. I suspect that the sixth volume was also delayed to make sure that nothing in Italy went undiscovered. But the

1 The biographies of Fuller mentioned herein include Joan von Mehren's *Minerva and the Muse: A Life of Margaret Fuller* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, 536 pages, $40); Donna Dickenson's *Margaret Fuller: Writing a Woman's Life* (St. Martin's Press, 1993, 247 pages, $35); Charles Capper's *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life—The Private Years* (Oxford University Press, 1993, 423 pages, $35—the first of a projected two volumes); and Belle Gale Chevigny's revision of her 1976 *Margaret Fuller: The Woman and the Myth* (Northeastern University Press, 1993, 574 pages, $42.50; $16.95 paper).

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final volume is now available,[2] and the wait was well worth it. We will not find here the answer to the question of her marriage, with which she mystified her friends and family, but Hudspeth gives us all the Italian letters in the last six months of her life, all the letters that could not be dated, and all those that have come to light since 1983. Most important in this last group are eighty-four new letters to James Freeman Clarke, the most intimate soul-mate to whom she poured out her deepest thoughts. These new letters to Clarke throw a more vivid light on her reading and intellectual development as she matured into a teacher of young women, a translator of German Romantic authors, and a transcendentalist with polymorphous erotic passions.

While the new biographies I have mentioned did not benefit from all of these letters, and are therefore somewhat provisional, enough was already known about Fuller's final year and there was already enough of her late correspondence available to have justly excited the admiration and industry of these biographers. Margaret Fuller was one of the most distinguished women of her time; her learning had no equal amongst her women contemporaries; and she was at the center of several lively international movements in her time. She is therefore well worth knowing as a pioneering feminist, professional journalist, and political revolutionary. I do not believe that her thinking can be said to have anticipated the theorizing of Hélène Cixous and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, two contemporary doyennes of international feminism. But if Susan Sontag is writing a play about Margaret—as the May 1993 *New Yorker* excerpts suggest—it can rightly be said that Miss Fuller has arrived.

Sarah Margaret Fuller was born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, on May 23, 1810. It is sometimes said that her father, the lawyer and Congressman Timothy Fuller, wanted a son. However that may be, he gave Margaret an education appropriate to a young man of her class. She was later to complain that his stern regimen destroyed her youth, brought on migraine headaches, and ruined her health. And it is clear that she had a confused psychosexual identity in which she attributed her intellectual and literary interests to her "male self" and her affective relations to her "female self." Nevertheless, the education her father gave her made possible a literary and intellectual distinction she could not otherwise have attained. She was instructed in the ancient and modern languages and in religion, history, literature, music, and politics—in each of which she excelled. She later taught at the Temple School of the "Orphic Seer" Bronson Alcott and co-edited, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* (1840–42). Steeped in German Romanticism and passionately in love with love, she yearned for a New England Goethe who could provide her with the knowledge of Eros that European women seemed to possess. But each time she tried to bind a man to her heart he betrayed her by withdrawing. At the same time she became emotionally involved, intensely so, with several of her girlfriends. A number of her women students developed more than crushes on her, and she talked confusedly about becoming a "lay nun," about a vestal devotion to the life of the mind and spirit. Adopting the persona of "Minerva," a mythical fusion of transcendental wisdom and goddesslike superiority, she translated the *Correspondence of Fraulein Günderode with Bettine von Arnim* (1842) and wrote an account of her travels in the West, *Summer on the Lakes* (1844).

In order to lift the intellectual culture of New England women, Margaret Fuller conducted, over a period of years, a series of "Conversations" that prefigured modern "consciousness-raising sessions." As Joan von Mehren vividly shows in *Minerva and the Muse*—a solid, well-researched, and sensibly written life—Margaret was a mesmerizing speaker. The liberty and full develop-

2 *The Letters of Margaret Fuller: Volume VI—1850 and Undated*, edited by Robert N. Hudspeth; Cornell University Press, 459 pages, $45.

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ment of women was, at this time, her recurrent theme. It is the power with which she expresses this theme that leads Donna Dickenson, in *Margaret Fuller: Writing a Woman's Life*, to call her "the intellectual superstar of her sex." This is a vulgarization of Emerson's point that Margaret was the most brilliant woman of her time, as indeed she was. But vulgarization seems to be Miss Dickenson's strong suit. She believes that all of the male contemporaries who wrote critically about Margaret Fuller—even the admirers Emerson, T. W. Higginson, and Henry James—were "menaced" by her distinction. Some men were put off by Margaret, James Russell Lowell famously amongst them, and quite a few women too, Sophia Hawthorne calling her "Queen Margaret" because of her curt arrogance and highborn airs. In any case, there seemed no prospect of marriage in New England, and, disenchanted with the bloodless intellectuals who kept from a woman what she wanted to know, in 1844 she moved to New York to become the literary editor of Horace Greeley's *New-York Daily Tribune*.

The first volume of Charles Capper's *Margaret Fuller*, which took the Bancroft Prize in history last year, gives us the fullest and most intellectually complex account, to date, of Fuller's tumultuous private life in New England. He ends the book before Fuller even departs for New York; but it is clear that his biography is constructed on the paradigm of the American intellectual who, in a state of social alienation, is driven toward personal involvement in some immense historical or political world crisis. We have not yet arrived in Fuller's life at the point of the Italian Risorgimento, but Capper has quite properly, I think, grasped the pattern, the tendency, the direction of Margaret Fuller's fumbling life decisions. If this pattern indeed be the key to her life, then the two-year period in New York was but an interlude in her search for something or someone to which to surrender herself. During this interlude, however, in addition to her journalism for Greeley, she kept her feet on the ground, publishing in quick succession *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)—which she had really drafted in New England—and a collection of her columns, *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846).[3] Both Joan von Mehren's life and Mary Kelly's introduction to *The Portable Margaret Fuller* are at pains to prove Fuller politically correct on the issues of slavery, the situation of the American Indian, and the poverty, prostitution, and criminality of women. This is no doubt partly because Harriet Martineau, among other contemporary reformers, condemned Fuller as indifferent to the abolitionist cause. Fuller *was* in favor of these liberal causes, but it seems clear to me that abolitionism, the rights of the Indian, and the condition of women at Sing-Sing were, for her, merely interchangeable elements in what was then called "The Sisterhood of Reforms." All liberals supported them. But she had not yet found *her* cause. Even feminism was not her cause, except at the beginning of her career.

Her cause, as it slowly evolved, came to be an international socialism radical enough to liberate her from the social constraints that had thus far condemned her to a lifetime of sexual ignorance, personal frustration, and arid spinsterhood. In the staid New England milieu in which Margaret Fuller had grown up, her longing could hardly have been given a name. And, indeed, as Miss von Mehren points out, Margaret so etherealized marriage that she could not have understood the repression of her own carnal desire. But she marveled at George Sand's insight into "the life of thought" and concluded: "She must know it through some man." There being no man likely to teach her what she wanted to know through marriage, her longing for sexual liberation manifested itself as an intellectual attraction to unconventional living arrangements alien to marriage and the traditional family. She was

3 Fuller's several books, together with a selection of her essays, articles, and letters, are newly reprinted in *The Portable Margaret Fuller*, edited, and with an introduction, by Mary Kelley (Penguin, 1994, 531 pages, $13.95 paper).

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drawn to the Brook Farm collectivists, with whom she often stayed; to other associationist experiments with a Brisbane or Owenite stamp; and to American Fourierism, which would reconstitute social organization into phalanxes. In some of these groups, issues of sexual egalitarianism, free love, and group marriage were not only discussed but practiced. It was very probably the case that, as the old New England religious prohibition against sexual indulgence was beginning to weaken in her, under the stress of sexual need, she was beginning to subsume her sexual impulses into an ecstasy of faith in the absolving transcendental cause of worldwide socialism.

In any case, in New York Fuller surrounded herself with associationists of the kind Henry James was later to satirize in *The Bostonians*, strange bearded theorists and less than respectable women living promiscuously in East Tenth Street boarding houses with names like The New Jerusalem. Quite chastely, however, Margaret maintained the New England proprieties, lived with the Greeleys, and publicly exalted Platonic love, even while she inspected prison conditions and interviewed prostitutes about how they had come to a life of sexual crime. Still virginal and celibate in her thinking, she fell in love with James Nathan, a Jewish businessman who broke her heart: he wanted a sexual relationship she was as yet too principled, if not inhibited, to give him. Marriage he did not offer her, perhaps because of the severity of her strictures against the institution in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, perhaps because of her vague talk of the ethereal love that the bodiless angels feel. The price of all this was that he dumped her for another woman, with whom he was probably already living. In any case, when he left for Europe, she managed to break free herself, and she headed for London and Paris. Ostensibly, she was to write articles for the *Tribune*, but it seems evident to me that—like many American expatriates—she was in search of a personal (if not a sexual) liberation only available at the fountainhead of European socialist thought.

The final stamp of what Margaret Fuller was to become, for better or worse, occurred in the convergence in her life of three new European acquaintances: George Sand, whose conduct and whose novels had already shown her the image of a woman in whom sexual passion and social commitment could continually interact; Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian Revolutionary in exile whose politics now offered her the socialist cause she needed; and Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish poet and patriot in exile, who immediately diagnosed the causes of her felt ineffectuality and frustration. After reading *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, he told her: "For you the first step in your deliverance and of the deliverance of your sex (of a certain class) is to know, whether you are permitted to remain a virgin."

What should be the position of a woman in the time of political revolution and social reorganization? Does the revolutionary condition itself—or merely believing in a radical politics—absolutely require that a woman jettison her sexual values and act out a free-love sexuality? Mickiewicz implied that Margaret would have to give up her virginity if she wanted to be free. How ready are radical men to seduce and corrupt sexual innocence on the ground of politics! The communes of the 1960s reeked of the idea that if you wanted to free your mind, you had to sleep around. I am reminded of Bobby Seale, the Black Panther, who said, if I recollect it aright, that the only position for a woman in the black liberation movement was prone. In Fuller's time, it was the master himself, Charles Fourier, who endorsed this sexual anarchy. He taught that in a properly constituted harmonic society —that is, in his associationist phalanxes— members could remain virginal if they wished, become monogamously involved with a single spouse, simultaneously embrace several spouses in polygamy, or take a string of changing sexual partners seriatim. Only homosexuality was forbidden. Fourier's sexual ideas were largely suppressed in the New England discussions of how to reorganize society, but committed associa-

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tionists, like Fuller, knew very well what the embrace of socialism was likely to involve.

In any case, once Margaret Fuller left New England, left the moral milieu of men like Emerson, James Freeman Clarke, and W. H. Channing, once she had left the protective milieu of her mother and the women of her family, she answered Mickiewicz's question for herself in the negative. Once she decided that it was not permitted for her to remain a virgin, she was, in a manner of speaking, fated—fated to travel to Rome, to fall in with Giovanni Angélo Ossoli, to go to bed with him, and (since we live in a world of moral cause and effect) to become pregnant with his child during the most tumultuous months of violence in the failed Italian Revolution. It hardly mattered that the Marquis spoke no English, was a hopeless intellectual inferior, had no idea of who she was, and offered no means of supporting her and the child. Once she became committed to the social reorganization of Italy through violent revolution, her sexual attitudes became fully radicalized.

Strangely enough, for one who is held by modern feminists to have been sexually liberated, Margaret Fuller concealed from her friends and family in New England her relationship with Ossoli and their child, even as she became more strident, in her ongoing *Tribune* articles, about her socialist politics. When the news of her "husband" and child broke, her friends and family wanted to believe that the worst was not true, that Margaret must have married Ossoli, that the child was legitimate. But Margaret's explanation as to why she had kept this decisive relationship secret for almost two years—in order to spare her mother worry—confused more than explained it. In fact, she had no intention of explaining herself, even at the price of social ostracism, telling one friend:

> If you decide to meet with me as before, and wish to say something about the matter to your friends, it will be true to say that there have been pecuniary reasons for this concealment. But *to you* in confidence I add, this is only half the truth; and I cannot explain or satisfy my dear friend farther—I should wish to meet her independent of all relations; but as we live in the midst of "society," she would have to inquire for me now as *Margaret Ossoli*; that being done, I should like to say nothing farther on the subject.

Such explanations were no explanation at all. Miss von Mehren has given the most sensitive account I have read of the impossible position in which Margaret's friends were left by her scandalous or at least baffling behavior. Sarah Clarke complained to Margaret that "the world" had been saying "injurious things of which we were not authorised to deny." Emerson offered to help her find an American publisher for her history of the Italian Revolution, mainly in order to keep her from coming back to Massachusetts. Rebecca Spring put it most decisively: "much as we should love to see you, and strange as it may seem, we, as well as all of your friends who have spoken to us about it, believe it will be undesirable for you to return at present."

But pecuniary conditions eventually forced the Ossolis to set sail for New England, where Margaret's literary skills promised some way of earning a living. Miss von Mehren is especially vivid and detailed in recounting their month-long voyage in the *Elizabeth*, the death of the captain from small pox, the baby Angelo's infection, and the child's unexpected recovery from the disease. The captain having died, the voyage was at the end under the command of an inexperienced mate, Henry Bangs, who was driven off course in a storm and who wrecked the ship on a sandbar off Fire Island. We are given here the fullest account I have read of the length of time it took for the ship to break up, who amongst the passengers and crew made for the shore and survived or died, who (like the Ossolis) hung back and so perished when the ship went under. Miss von Mehren's account of the newspaper testimony of those who tried to rescue or help the survivors is vivid and compelling.

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In the end, the Ossolis' bodies were never recovered, most of Margaret's luggage was lost to the sea (including her manuscript history of the Italian Revolution), and no marriage certificate was ever retrieved. Whether Margaret Fuller married Ossoli and, if so, whether before or after the child's birth, Miss von Mehren cannot tell us.

In any case, Margaret Fuller was to some of her critics the Murphy Brown of her time, the single professional woman who claimed for herself a sexual freedom that justified even the bearing of a child out of wedlock. Margaret, of course, was different from many modern feminists: she considered herself married to Ossoli and intended to support him and live with him in America in a traditional family arrangement. But, in forewarning her mother that Giovanni was ten years her junior and that he might not forever be satisfied with her, she was perhaps letting her know that theirs was "a Fourierist marriage"—that is, one without a ceremony. Or no marriage at all. This much seems suggested in one of Margaret's letters to her mother in which she remarks, "In earlier days, I dreamed of doing and being much, but now I am content with the Magdalen to rest my plea hereon, '*She has loved much.*'" Out of such as this came Hawthorne's Hester Prynne.

As I review Fuller's letters and journals, her journalism and her travel writing, not to speak of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, it is impossible for me to resist the conclusion—shared by none of these biographers—that Margaret Fuller is more compelling as an instance of radical thought and sexual confusion than as a nineteenth-century writer. (Perhaps, after all, that is her modern appeal.) Emerson called her pen a "non-conductor," and, with James Freeman Clarke and W. H. Channing, tried to tidy up quotations from her letters and journals in the 1852 *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli.* This service had led Donna Dickenson to claim that these men produced a Fuller style that was "frilly, namby-pamby, prissy and florid," what was "quintessentially 'a woman's way of writing.'" This is of course nonsense. It is the sad case that Margaret Fuller wrote before the invention of the American vernacular style. Her prose is leaden, weighted with ill-digested historical and mythological allusions, at times prissy and florid, but always literary in the worst sense of the word. Her friend Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote: "If I wished anyone to do her justice, I should say, as I have indeed said, 'Never read what she has written.'" But, alas, if Margaret Fuller mesmerized her contemporaries, we cannot hear this brilliant talker talk, we cannot hear this "moral improvisatrice" (as Henry James called her) weave her audible spell. We are left with books, and they, however noble in intent, fail of pleasing aesthetic form.

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A concept of liberty: Benjamin Constant

by Renee Winegarten

On April 11, 1804, when Benjamin Constant was thirty-six, he confided to his diary: "I have excellent qualities . . . but I am not quite a real being. Inside me there are two people, one the observer of the other." It might have been the voice of the self-analytical Adolphe, the destructive and self-destructive anti-hero of Constant's celebrated autobiographical novel. Part womanizing Valmont and part sensitive Werther (the author of *Adolphe* met the creators of both, Laclos and Goethe), Constant was a skeptic rationalist and a self-tormenting introvert, a man fascinated by suicide and obsessed with death. To a confidante of his youth he seemed "a true chameleon." He was also one of the founding fathers of French political liberalism (a word used here throughout in its European sense). It was he who shaped a diverse mass of liberal notions into a clear and coherent practical political doctrine. Strange that a man with such a strong sense of nothingness (commonly an attribute of those inclined to the political extreme) should strive for so hopeful and positive an aim as the freedom of the individual in a society governed by just laws.

Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) has been called the "most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy." That was the view of Isaiah Berlin in his influential essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." "No one saw the conflict between the two types of liberty better, or expressed it more clearly, than Benjamin Constant," observed Berlin. Constant took his stand on the area of "negative liberty," where an individual should be left in peace to think, speak, and act without interference from authority. The individual must have inner space, with freedom of religion, opinion, and expression guaranteed. This was by no means the case in France in Constant's own troubled times, whether under the *ancien régime* of Louis XVI, Robespierre's revolutionary Committee of Public Safety, the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, or the reactionary Bourbon Restoration. Even today, this standpoint of Constant's can scarcely be taken for granted, or regarded simply as old hat, in view of the insidious spread of fanaticism and the undermining of the role of the individual in theory and practice.

While professing deep admiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a thinker who cherished theories of liberty, Constant denounced him for furnishing weapons and pretexts for all kinds of tyranny, whether of one man or of many. "It is in the name of liberty that we were given prisons, scaffolds, countless varieties of harassment," wrote Constant, ever mindful of the bloodstained French revolutionary Terror of 1793–94. Constant envisaged Rousseau and his disciples as the proponents of what Isaiah Berlin has named "positive liberty," the kind favored by those who believe they know best and who interfere ostensibly for one's own good. Constant's acute penetration of the corrosive nature of tyranny and its conse-

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quences would prove to be startlingly prophetic of all kinds of modern authoritarianism and totalitarianism, whether of Left or Right.

After Constant's death in December 1830, and the astonishing scenes at his funeral, attended by crowds of young people—for whom he had become the hero and instructor of parliamentary liberalism, the tireless fighter against injustice—his role and his writings began to fade from view. Other doctrines would be vying for public attention: among them, varieties of utopian socialism, Marxism, nationalism. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, his subtle short novel *Adolphe*, first published in London in 1816, and for which he himself professed to care little, found admirers among leading men of letters and soon entered the literary canon. In politics, though, he remained a controversial figure: he was naturally loathed by all those on the Left and the Right who despised and rejected liberal ideas and values; and condemned out of hand by some as a cynic and an opportunist.

Certainly, his was a name that cropped up here and there in various contexts historical, literary, and biographical. Yet although a selection of his works was published in the Pléiade collection in 1957, many of his important political writings were comparatively little known. A possible exception was his powerful pamphlet against Napoleon Bonaparte, *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* (where the word "usurpation" was substituted for "despotism" and "arbitrary rule"). It was not until the late 1970s, and especially since 1980, the 150th anniversary of Constant's death, that he and his work became the subject of numerous studies, not only in France but also in the United States and Great Britain.[1] Some of his political works were now reprinted in scholarly editions. In 1980 there were three editions of *De l'Esprit de conquête* alone. Documents began to turn up and continue to do so.

The immediate cause of this activity in France (and elsewhere) was evidently the disillusion of hitherto fellow-traveling writers and intellectuals with revolutionism in general, with discredited ideology, with Soviet Marxism and the Soviet regime. Some deluded spirits transferred their allegiance to Mao's China, but in the end, especially after the collapse of arbitrary East European regimes, the Communist dream in practice could scarcely fail to be seen for the nightmare it was. In France, the so-called "new philosophers," disillusioned Marxist intellectuals and former activists in the would-be revolutionary events of 1968, floated on the wave of "neo-liberalism." Raymond Aron replaced Sartre (who died in 1980) as the leading intellectual guru. The most dire insult of all, the dread charge of being a "bourgeois liberal," ceased to be heard. There was renewed interest in the origins of French liberalism and therefore in the role of Benjamin Constant in its development.

The object of all this fresh inquiry was not a straightforward being to be easily assimilated. Diverse, disturbed, and disturbing, Constant was inclined to mockery and self-mockery, irony and paradox. Learned in Greek as well as Latin, fluent in German and English, he was not only the author of fiction and drama but also a self-probing diarist and autobiographer, a brilliant literary and political journalist, a scholar, a moralist, a religious and political thinker, polemicist, orator, ardent parliamentarian, and opposition député (from 1819 to 1822, and from 1824 until his death). He belonged to a cosmopolitan age when the word "literature" (in Germaine de Staël's definition) embraced everything except the physical sciences; and it was in the broad field of literature that his early ambitions lay. He would often start a work—for instance, his translation of William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* or his refutation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—only to abandon it. Some of

1 Among the more recent see *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind*, by Biancamaria Fontana (Yale University Press, 1991), and *Benjamin Constant: A Biography*, by Dennis Wood (Routledge, 1993).

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his writings, left unpublished in manuscript, together with various pamphlets, articles, and parliamentary speeches, have only recently been made available to modern readers.

The fact that many of Constant's political writings were incomplete, unpublished, or dispersed, goes some way to explain their relative neglect. He often used works he had earlier abandoned to furnish the arguments of later, completed ones, like his *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements représentatifs*. Throughout his life, just like Coleridge, though from a different angle, he was preoccupied with a *magnum opus* on religion. Where Coleridge labored on a defense of Christianity, Constant aimed to promote the lasting value of religious feeling irrespective of the established churches. Although in his youth Constant had tended to irreligion, he experienced periods of pietism, and even amusingly observed that he was too skeptical to be an unbeliever. He once claimed that he had upheld the same principle for forty years: "liberty in everything, in religion, philosophy, literature, industry, politics: and by liberty I mean the triumph of individuality, both over authority which would seek to rule by despotism, and over the masses who demand the right to enslave the minority to the majority." Yet he was really too complicated and self-contradictory to be entirely consistent.

Wits had fun with his name and liked to call him "Constant the inconstant." Besides, he held that in every question there is always some idea that upsets everything; and that a truth is only complete when it contains its contrary. Observations of that sort foxed contemporaries who preferred matters to be cut and dried, and earned him the reputation of a scoffer, a person who was not in earnest, an opportunist. That was the unfavorable opinion of the poet and critic Sainte-Beuve, who cordially disliked Constant—but then, whom did he like among his fellow writers?

Born a Swiss aristocrat in Lausanne, Henri-Benjamin de Constant de Rebecque was the descendant of French Protestants who had fled persecution during the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion. How could he be politically active in France? French citizenship was granted during the French Revolution to *bona fide* descendants of Huguenot victims of religious persecution under the *ancien régime*. In addition, the purchase of landed property in France would entitle Constant to stand for election to the Chambre des Députés. But throughout his life there were always some who queried the authenticity of his French citizenship and commitment, and who created difficulties for him. In their eyes he would always be an outsider, and not only for the decades he spent in political opposition.

Any novelist who ventured to give a fictional character the upbringing and education of Benjamin Constant would be derided for an excessively lurid imagination. It was Constant's private tragedy that his mother died shortly after his birth. The child passed first into the hands of various female relatives, and then from the age of four he was looked after by the young peasant girl his father had seduced and eventually married in secret. Constant's father followed the path of many Vaudois aristocrats who, kept out of office by the ruling Bernese, served in the armies of foreign princes: he was therefore frequently absent. Withdrawn, formidable, demanding, convinced that his son was an infant prodigy, he entrusted the boy to a succession of improbable tutors. One was a sadist; another turned out to be an atheist and a libertine, who moved into a brothel with the boy. (Constant would keep his taste for prostitutes.) Various shady pedagogues followed, among them a onetime lawyer who (it later appeared) had had to leave France in a hurry. His successor was a defrocked monk who ended in suicide. Nothing, however, could quell the boy's curiosity and passion for learning.

Almost fourteen, Constant entered the University of Erlangen, in Bavaria, and through his father's connections he was appointed gentleman of the bedchamber to the Margrave of Anspach-Bayreuth. It was at Erlangen that he is said to have acquired his

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love of gambling, which would often lead him heavily into debt throughout his life. While studying seriously there, Constant also became involved in numerous scrapes, and he finally blotted his copybook by sardonically mocking the Margravine, his benefactress.

The precocious youth of sixteen was next dispatched to the University of Edinburgh, where, he said, he spent the "most agreeable" year of his life. It was the dazzling age of the Scottish Enlightenment. Constant distinguished himself in the grave debates of the Speculative Society, where political, philosophical, and metaphysical matters were discussed. Some of his Whig fellow students would remain lifelong friends. One close friend observed of Constant that he seemed "to have drawn freedom with his first breath," while commenting on the "endless mazes of his character." However, Constant was obliged to discontinue his studies in Edinburgh, apparently because of his failure to pay his gambling debts.

He was sent to Paris, where he stayed with the well-known journalist J.-B. Suard, friend of the liberal-minded *philosophe* Condorcet. In Paris, Constant continued his career at the gaming table and in the brothel. It was possibly at an intellectual gathering at Suard's that he met the first of the two remarkable women who influenced the course of his life. This was Isabelle van Tuyll, now Mme de Charrière, daughter of a Dutch nobleman and many years older than Constant. (James Boswell thought she had "more genius than any woman I ever saw, and more acquired perfections," and he therefore decided that it would be "madness to marry her.") She was a woman of sharp wit, far too clear-sighted and brilliant for her milieu.

Mme de Charrière (1740–1805) had already published three novels, including *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*, and she was on the point of publishing *Caliste*, her best-known work of fiction. With Constant she would collaborate on a novel entitled *Lettres de d'Arsillé fils* (first published in 1981). Skeptical, embittered, she shared her "scorn for the rest of the human race" with young Constant. It was she who (so he said) inspired him to run off alone to England—a country he chose because he thought it was the place with the most freedom. In this way she hoped to liberate him from dependence on his eccentric father.

However, in 1788 his father obtained a post for him at the court of the Duke of Brunswick. Constant's youthful radicalism, which was reinforced by the French Revolution of 1789, did not make him popular among the stiff Prussian courtiers. It was the period of his revolutionism at one remove. "The human race is born stupid and led by rogues, that is the norm," he had once reminded Mme de Charrière, but if he had to choose between rogues he still preferred the reformers to the royalists. Although he was stunned when he learned of the ghastly summary executions under the Terror, he would never abandon his underlying trust in the fundamental principles of the French Revolution itself.

His private life was in turmoil. In 1789 he had rashly married a lady-in-waiting to the Duchess of Brunswick. This ill-considered match would end in divorce. Oddly, Constant appears to have regarded matrimony as a safe haven that offered a solution to all his inner conflicts. He had already had several love affairs—mostly of the sort that Stendhal would later define as love-in-the-head—where his favorite method of trying to advance his cause was to make a show of taking poison, with threats to kill himself. In Brunswick he encountered the placid Charlotte von Hardenberg, then estranged from her first husband: she became Constant's mistress. Later (in 1808), after many vicissitudes, the long-suffering Charlotte would become Constant's second wife. His account of this strangely disconcerting affair is to be found in his potent autobiographical narrative *Cécile* (first published in 1951).

Meanwhile, in 1794 he had met the extraordinary woman writer and political thinker with whom his name was always to be linked, the one who propelled into the world of French politics his hitherto un-

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focused ambition to create a name for himself. Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), prodigiously gifted daughter of Jacques Necker, the wealthy self-made Swiss banker and finance minister under Louis XVI, was by then the author of plays, stories, and nonfiction works. She was already called "la trop célèbre" (to be freely translated as "too famous for a woman") by her detractors. As the wife of the Swedish Ambassador, she had presided over an extremely influential literary-political Parisian salon. She had absorbed politics from her adored father, and she knew that her only means of achieving power—at second hand—lay through the talented men she attracted into her circle and whose career she promoted.

Germaine de Staël found the tall, willowy Constant unprepossessing in appearance, but at the same time "extraordinarily amusing." He shone (again like Coleridge) as a brilliant talker who could vie in eloquence with herself. Equal in intellect, they stimulated each other. According to those who heard Constant in conversation, he was "perhaps the greatest wit since Voltaire." Dazzled by her courtly charm and intelligence, Constant pursued her for eighteen months, staging a (possibly fake) suicide in his by now customary manner, until she succumbed.

In May 1795, they left Switzerland together for the Paris of the precarious Directoire. "With all my impetuosity and with a youthful ardour belied by my years [he was then in his late twenties] I devoted myself to revolutionary opinions. I was in thrall to ambition and I saw only two things to be desired: to be the citizen of a republic and the leader of a party," said Constant. Since organized political parties did not yet exist, he presumably meant by "party" an association of freedom-loving individuals who shared the same interests and battled for the same constitutional changes. In Germaine de Staël's salon he met the men of the hour. Through her, he found himself talking with Sieyès, the power-broker and constitution-maker, and Barras, the strong man of the Directoire. Assiduously, Constant attended the debates in the Convention. Political articles of his began to attract notice.

The main drift of his ideas at the time in various pamphlets coincided with those of Germaine de Staël in her political writings. Whereas formerly Montesquieu and Rousseau had believed that a republic was suited only to a small country, the new American Republic showed that it was possible to have a viable republic in a large one. Constant, along with Germaine de Staël, stressed the importance of rallying to the French Republic all those of moderate views, in order to counter the very real threats against it from ultra-royalists on the Right and Jacobins on the Left.

With the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), which ended the Directoire, the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul aroused Constant's misgivings. He saw at once that Bonaparte was only concerned with his own power. Through Sieyès, Constant was appointed to the Tribunate, where he distinguished himself by his opposition to measures he believed were instruments of tyranny. On January 5, 1800, he spoke out eloquently in favor of free discussion and independence for the Assembly, "without which there is merely servitude and silence, a silence that the whole of Europe would hear." Bonaparte's elder brother, Joseph, conveyed the First Consul's displeasure to the recalcitrant pair. Nonetheless, Constant protested when special courts were introduced to deal with suspects. Unsurprisingly, Bonaparte was seriously irritated by this libertarian gadfly and his troublesome companion. Constant was among those expelled from the Tribunate in 1802. It was the end of the hopes of a political career that he had harbored since 1795. Years would pass before those hopes were to be renewed in an extraordinary reversal that damaged his reputation forever.

Constant followed Germaine de Staël into exile, either at her home at Coppet close by Lake Geneva, or to the places of internal exile in France to which Napoleon condemned her for her eloquent defiance. When

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she traveled to Germany in 1804, to prepare for her influential work *De l'Allemagne*, Constant accompanied her and they conversed with the great men of the day, including Goethe and Schiller. Constant was inspired to write an adaptation of Schiller's drama about Wallenstein, that ambitious enigmatic leader of the Thirty Years War, whose indecision must have struck a chord.

Running errands, Constant was often at Germaine de Staël's beck and call. The more he became dependent on her, the more he veered between affection and resentment. He sought ways of escape without being able to make a wounding irrevocable break. The two engaged in scenes of high emotional drama. He contemplated marriage with a perfectly ordinary girl whom he thought he could control. At times he recognized the folly of this course, noting in his diary: "Germaine said to me yesterday, accurately enough, that as soon as I was bound to Amélie my imagination would move into reverse: instead of seeing as I do now the drawbacks of a woman of wit who is far too famous I should see those of a mediocre woman." This would be the fate of Oswald, who marries mediocrity, in Mme de Staël's epoch-making novel *Corinne*. When Constant was spending long hours in Germaine de Staël's salon, he was yearning for solitude in the country. When he was on his country estate, he missed the brilliant and stimulating discussions in her circle of the leading thinkers of the day. Later, when Constant was at home with his devoted wife Charlotte, he was often bored. He privately owned that Germaine de Staël was the only person who really understood him. And long after the pair had gone their separate ways, "How I miss Mme de Staël!" he confided to his diary when his work was not progressing well.

Constant's novel *Adolphe* chronicles the idiosyncratic character of the young eponymous anti-hero. In accordance with the disreputable manners of the day, Adolphe decides, à la Valmont, to become the lover of Ellénore, a lady who has been living with a nobleman, by whom she has had two children. Ellénore falls deeply in love with Adolphe, and gives up her secure if equivocal position to be with him. By subtle gradations, the more enmeshed Adolphe becomes in all the sacrifices she makes for him, the more he yearns for freedom to pursue his neglected ambition and occupy the place that is his due in society. When Ellénore discovers that Adolphe intends to break with her, she falls ill and dies. Adolphe is free, but in destroying Ellénore he has destroyed himself. He remains incapable of action.

According to the moralizing preface to the second edition, it is an oppressive society that has defeated Adolphe, and it would have made no difference had he really been in love with Ellénore. Their irregular relationship was doomed. To delineate Adolphe, with his weaknesses and egoism, Constant relied on ruthlessly probing his own failings, the way even his generous instincts worked against his own freedom. He could draw on his liaisons with numerous women, among them not only Mme de Staël but also the Irish courtesan Anna Lindsay, and even his former mistress (now his wife) Charlotte. How to reconcile personal freedom with obligation and responsibility? To that query this ever intriguing novel gives a dusty answer.

A reminder from Germaine de Staël: on April 17, 1813, she could still write to stir Constant, "And what are you actually doing with your rare genius?" She herself had been working tirelessly for the downfall of Napoleon, and she had traveled across Europe to win support for the indecisive General Bernadotte, Crown Prince of Sweden, in whom she saw a liberal replacement for the Emperor as ruler of France. Seized once again by "the crazy restlessness of ambition," Constant too gambled on this unlikely candidate. It was in support of Bernadotte that he wrote *De l'Esprit de conquête*, his potent criticism of Napoleon's authoritarian regime, an analysis that stays valid for all ages.

Constant's originality lay in demonstrating that Napoleon's dictatorship, resting as it did upon bloody wars of conquest and the

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suppression of dissent, was not in accord with a modern society, which needed peace and freedom for the pursuit of commerce. The idea that the form of government should be in harmony with the spirit of the age, and that the modern world spelled commerce, was not new. It was the application that Constant made of it that struck many of his contemporaries as novel. The modern individual citizen wanted freedom to live quietly in quest of private ends, Constant maintained, and that freedom had to be guaranteed by any government that could be regarded as modern.

For Constant, the Napoleonic empire was rooted in hypocrisy, spying, and lies. Wars of aggression were fought not in the name of world conquest but of honor, national independence, and the defense of hearth and home. With telling irony Constant observed: "you might say that they call their hearths all the places that they have set alight." The system of hypocrisy, spying, and lies permeated the whole of society. Constant perceived that such an authoritarian regime, in its quest for uniformity, mutilated the inner life: "it pursues [man] into the intimate sanctuary of his thought and, forcing him to lie to his conscience, it robs him of the last remaining consolation of the oppressed." Moreover, the individual is left at the mercy of the master's subordinates. According to Constant, under arbitrary rule it is not enough for you to stand aside when others are struck down, for you yourself have contributed to shape degraded public opinion: "Innocent people have disappeared, you have judged them guilty. So you have opened the path along which you tread in your turn." These impassioned warnings remain as forceful as when they were written.

His bitter scorn is directed to writers, many of them suborned by Napoleon. How fond they were of the words "necessity," "public safety," and "*raison d'état*"! Would these specious words ever fall into disuse? inquired Constant. "The mania of writers is to show themselves to be statesmen . . . The author, peaceably seated at his desk . . . believes for the moment that he is clothed in power, because he preaches the abuse of it. . . . He loudly repeats the big words of public safety, supreme law. . . . Poor fool! He is speaking to men who . . . will practice his theory on himself." Constant's analysis of the "vanity that has warped the judgment of so many writers" has unfortunately remained true for a large number of major and minor literary figures on Right and Left in the twentieth century.

The news that the defeated and exiled Napoleon had escaped from Elba in March 1815, and was marching on Paris, stunned the world. One day Constant was defending constitutional monarchy under Louis XVIII, newly enthroned by the Allies, while qualifying the deposed Emperor as Attila and Genghis Khan; and the next he was closeted with Napoleon's brother, Joseph. Then Napoleon himself received Constant, who admitted in his diary that the Emperor was an "astonishing man." After the second audience, however, Constant noted: "It is not precisely freedom that he wants." Nonetheless, Benjamin Constant was entrusted with the task of making amendments to the constitution of the Empire, the new version being familiarly known as "la benjamine." He was appointed to the Council of State and, as a courtier, he wore the splendid gold-embroidered uniform of his rank.

Why did he do it? Was it, as Sainte-Beuve would harshly declare, that Constant really believed in nothing? Constant gambled on the Napoleon of the Hundred Days as he had gambled on Bernadotte, and on both occasions he had chosen losers. It is hard to imagine that, with all his experience and understanding of Napoleon's tyranny, he could believe even for a moment in the supposed transformation of Machiavellian lion into liberal lamb. The skeptical Constant could scarcely have dreamed that Napoleon's forced conversion to liberalism would endure once the emperor was restored to full power.

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and his abdication in June 1815, Constant went into voluntary exile in Brussels and London.

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When he returned in 1816 to the Paris of the second restoration of Louis XVIII, the rest of his life was devoted—in exemplary fashion—to pursuing liberal ends, both as writer and député. If, as he proclaimed, his political principles were applicable to all representative regimes, they could be applied to constitutional monarchy. Like most French liberals from Montesquieu to Mme de Staël, he took for his model an idealized view of constitutional arrangements in England, adding modifications of his own. Royal power must be neutral, and ministers responsible to the elected representatives rather than to the monarch. What he wanted was religious toleration, and he advocated the separation of Church and State to that end. Recognizing the vital importance of the freedom of the press, he battled hard for it. He defended individuals who had been unjustly condemned; opposed the slave trade; fought for political rights for the blacks of Martinique and Guadeloupe; and urged the independence of Greece, among other noble causes.

It was not an easy ride, especially under reactionary ministers, notably those of the blinkered authoritarian Charles X. Constant did have contact with the liberal-minded Louis-Philippe, duc d'Orléans. When, after the Revolution of July 1830, Louis-Philippe ascended the throne, the "Citizen King" offered Constant a post (which he declined) and helped him to settle his gambling debts. By then Constant was a very sick man with only a few months to live. It did not take long, though, for him to feel doubts about the liberal credentials of the new regime, and so he remained in opposition to the last.

Like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberals—and despite his sense of nothingness, his conviction that truth is many-sided, and at times his cynicism—Constant overvalued the role of reason and enlightenment in human affairs. The notion that fanaticism and war were incompatible with the modern world was to be shattered by the pursuit of irrationalism, by ever more savage wars and nationalistic barbarism. For him, too, a certain amount of property was an essential requisite for elector and elected alike: only the property-owner possessed the education and experience for true judgment. In his day the masses were illiterate, and he could not forget the frightening role of the wild, unpredictable crowds in the Revolution of 1789. With talent and through education, however, he believed the number of property owners would necessarily increase.

At the same time he was far from indifferent to the fate of the poor and hungry. He defended poor working people against injustice and oppression, objecting to the increasing concentration of land in the hands of the few, a development which, he said, was driving the proletariat to despair and rebellion. All the same, he did not appear to realize that the laboring classes had interests of their own and that they would soon be clamoring to defend these interests for themselves.

Few in his day understood so well as Constant the corrupting effects of arbitrary rule and false ideology not only upon society at large but upon the individual spirit. Notwithstanding his scarcely exemplary lifestyle as libertine and perennial gambler, there was a moral spark in his writings, whose eloquence and irony still have power to move. If the revival of interest in liberal thought persists—not least as a challenge to various surviving forms of "socialism"—it seems likely that the reputation of Benjamin Constant will grow with it. It is worth exploring the writer who proclaimed that "uniformity is death," and who stigmatized those who "offer up in sacrifice to the abstract being real human beings of flesh and blood."

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Poems *by John Haines, William Logan & Donald Hall*

Star photo

You are here, in this country
of diminishing returns,
on this patient rock
slowly cooling in a cloud.

This is your country,
the only one you can claim;
yet it is no country,
no land, but an eddy of dust
in the holocaustal wind.

Think of a city growing distant
in the night below you—
the bridgelights winking, traffic
no more than a fiery ribbon,
as the aircraft lifts
away and the clouds close in.

Now *earth* is only a name, and
the galaxies, fused and glittering,
are more than a name—the sum
of discarded theories,
realms of terror and perplexity.

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And the woodland you learned
to love has vanished—
no trees bent to the wind,
nothing but the memory of trees,
sand, and pulverized glass.

You are here, on this stretched
and icy field, open range
without limit, with no horizon,
no imaginable hedgerow;
no view but a flickering whiteness
at the edge of deepest darkness.

You are here because there is
nowhere else for you to be,
and you cannot leave without
taking everything with you . . .

Shepherd and eternal sentry,
the cloud-horses you ride at will,
stars for your sheep,
and a comet for your watchdog.

1992–94

—John Haines

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Blues for Penelope

The roses are gone, and the hollyhocks,
but still each night I mend your cotton socks.
Now our little boy has the chicken pox.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

The men hanging round are just boys to me.
One from Trinidad and one from Tallahassee.
But I need more than boys to make my sugar tea.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

All night I'm waiting by the telephone.
I haven't paid the bill and I'm all alone.
Don't you ever hear those voices in the dial tone?
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

Life without you is a heart attack.
You just got your suitcase and started to pack.
I know you'll come driving a brand-new Cadillac.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

You're a man who couldn't cross the ocean
without making a scene or some sort of commotion.
Out in the sun you'd forget your suntan lotion.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

I'm tired of living on government checks.
They pay for the liquor but not for sex.
Now they tell me you left no forwarding address.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

Last night I had the strangest vision.
Two big bay horses had a collision,
and there was your face on the television.
Ulysses, honey, when you coming home?

—*William Logan*

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Notes from India

As I said before (do I
repeat myself? therefore I re-
peat myself), when we entered
P. Lal's living room for biscuits
and tea, Sanskrit poems,
and literary discussion, he
announced our topic,
asking, "What do you think of irony?"

At the Agra depot, the
small boy with feet big as Shaquille
O'Neill's accepted five rupees
and took out of his pocket
an archaic wooden top
with a cotton thread for twirling.
He smiled to bestow his gift
as we looked away toward the train.

In the market seventy
stalls of fruit-sellers piled apples,
pears, pomegranates,
kiwis, and pineapples in pyramids
of beauty, as carefully
constructed as the Taj, or the
arrangements of carrots,
leeks, and peppers in vegetable stalls.

Halfway from Bombay to
Madras, the Air India Airbus
cabin filled with smoke.
As we flew back I read Edward Said's
Orientalism calmly
in the silence of the cabin.
When we landed among fire-
engines, my knees turned to *paneer*.

Friends invited us to the Club,
clearly something established
and left behind by the Raj,

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with its eighteen bright green fairways
in downtown Calcutta. We sipped
Black and White Scotch for two hours,
then dined under grand
chandeliers, without drinking the water.

Passing in Old Delhi
from the Red Fort to Jama Masjid,
our bicycle rickshaws
clattered and spurted through neighborhoods
of a hundred thousand shops
and two million people shouting,
loving, bargaining, laughing,
quarreling, chatting, worshiping.

The odor of flowers
in the market—overwhelming jasmine,
red roses, marigolds,
tuberoses, and lotus blossoms—
mixed with another
perfume as we crossed to the shoemaker's:
divers excrements
of camel, dog, elephant, human, cow.

We drove for six hours
from Madras to Pondicherry, on roads
and tracks through villages
of twenty thousand, past rice paddies,
over wheat spread on the road
for tire-thrashing, past water holes
where women washed and spread
resplendent saris under the sun.

In conversation over tea,
at lunch, in a street market,
after a poetry reading,
or walking in temple grounds,
we encountered in a dark eye
humor, affection, shrewdness,
religious intelligence,
and endurance under the sun.

—Donald Hall

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Art

Graphic artist

by Mario Naves

Forty-odd years since the triumph of American painting (to borrow Irving Sandler's stirring phrase), Abstract Expressionism has been going through something of a reappraisal. Within the past few months there have been significant gallery and museum exhibitions devoted to artists linked with what is probably the most influential movement in twentieth-century American art. What is interesting about the cumulative impact of these shows is not that they constitute a critical re-evaluation—far from it. Rather, they serve as a confirmation of New York's one-time artistic preeminence. Such ego-boosting seems inevitable, and is it any wonder? The art world, having become accustomed to a cultural fatigue fueled by novelty and narcissism, may well be pining for—dare it be said?—art of substance.

But is Abstract Expressionism necessarily the best place to find it? The event of the season has been the retrospective of paintings by Willem de Kooning at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. De Kooning is probably the last touchstone for a variety of artists who have little else in common, and his status as a painter approaches legend. However, viewers resistant to art-world machinations and hyperbole (a crowd whose number is, apparently, quite limited) found the exhibit to be a sobering experience. If the retrospective confirmed de Kooning's genius in his paintings of the Forties and early Fifties, then the rest of the exhibition documented a depressing slide into self-parody. If de Kooning, arguably the finest proponent of Abstract Expressionism, has proved to be merely mortal, then what does this say about the mythos built up around the movement as a whole?

These issues are bound to be raised again with "Franz Kline: Black & White, 1950–1961."[1] Its focus is the paintings for which Kline is best known, the gestural black-and-white abstractions of his mature period (he died in 1962). Recent exhibitions devoted to a specific aspect of an artist's work have resulted in some glorious moments—"Pioneering Cubism" and "Matisse in Morocco" spring instantly to mind. Kline, however, is not Picasso or Matisse, nor does he approach de Kooning at his best. If de Kooning has proved to be mortal, then it might be said that "Black & White" reveals Kline to be only more so.

Indeed, "Black & White" only reinforces Kline's one-dimensionality as an artist. His

1 "Franz Kline: Black & White, 1950–1961" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on December 15, 1994, and remains on view through March 12, 1995. The show was organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, where it appeared last fall (September 8–November 27, 1994); after closing at the Whitney, it will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (March 25–June 5, 1995). A catalogue, with an essay by David Anfam, has been published by Houston Fine Art Press (120 pages, $40).

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black-and-white paintings would, perhaps, benefit from a full-scale retrospective, one including the early realist work and later color abstractions. As it is, however, "Black & White" lacks grounding. It treats its subject with a gravity that strains the credibility of the work. The exhibition solemnly trots out one "masterpiece" after another, as if Kline's paintings had some sort of religious significance. For some people they do. The crowds I attended the exhibition with seemed positively cowed by the work. Who can argue with paintings that leave so little room for dialogue?

"Black & White" is an elegantly installed exhibition. It's also a little boring. One feels that its uniformity is due as much to a certain kind of interior decoration as to the work's limitations. Ideally, a museum exhibition should concentrate on an artist's strengths, showing us why the work is (or is felt to be) worth spending time with. "Black & White," however, doesn't tell us anything we didn't already know about Kline's work, nor, one suspects, does it intend to. It coasts on received wisdom. The irony is that the Whitney—an institution that prides itself on being on the "cutting edge"—should play host to an exhibition that, in so many ways, upholds the status quo. (On the other hand, it is this status quo upon which the museum's recent political tomfoolery rests: perhaps the folks at the Whitney know what they're doing after all.)

Upon entering "Black & White," one is wowed by the brawniness of Kline's paintings; their immediate force is undeniable, indeed almost bullying. (In the catalogue essay, David Anfam writes that Kline's paintings "hit the viewer full in the face." True enough, but the question remains: Who wants to be hit in the face by a painting?) Upon closer inspection, however, Kline's paintings don't hold up. His compositions may be powerful, but his paint handling has little juice. His brushstrokes are over-insistent and his surfaces are dull when they're not finicky. While it may sound facetious to claim that Kline didn't make much use of color in these paintings, his use of black and white is unimaginative, programmatic; comparisons to de Kooning's black-and-white abstractions are devastating. Reading in the catalogue, one isn't surprised to learn that Kline was indifferent to the colors he used in the paintings—it's there to scan in the work. When his colors do have some variety, it's due to his infamous use of shabby materials. Yellowing paint, it would seem, forgives artists if not house painters.

Although Kline saw his use of white as a sign of his painterly acumen, it is, on the whole, problematic. He refuted any comparisons of his work to calligraphy because he (in his own words) "painted out areas of black with my whites." This is a feeble definition of painting. For the most part, Kline didn't really *paint* with white, he edited with it. His use of white functions as a sort of erasure that has more in common with drawing than with painting. As such, Kline's white carries nominal pictorial heft; it certainly doesn't carry as color or space. And his editing—using white to fuzz the edges of black brushstrokes, for instance—is fussy. For action painting it can be downright persnickety.

It is in Kline's earliest paintings that his blacks and whites interact in a dynamic manner. In both *Nijinsky* (1950) and *Ninth Street* (1951), Kline opens up the space of the paintings by allowing his line a flexibility that his later work is without. Here his white has pictorial presence, pushing up from behind the black line and indicating depth; both paintings breathe. (One suspects de Kooning's influence.) But this dynamism is, on the whole, missing from the exhibition. As one tracks the years that "Black & White" focuses on, Kline's paintings become increasingly automatic; *Black Sienna* (1960), for instance, is almost painful to look at because of its lethargy. And when the paintings aren't pro forma, their gestural busy-work seems borne of frustration: How could anyone mistake the wet-into-wet smearing of *Requiem* (1958) for painting?

Clement Greenberg wrote that Kline's paintings were "tautness quintessential," and

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looking at the hulking form propped slightly off-center in *Painting No. 1* (1954), one knows exactly what he meant. Kline's paintings are sturdy contraptions: he had a knack for sectioning off each canvas in such a way that his lines vigorously clamp the painting's surface and hold the ground on which they are situated. There is an architectonic stability to Kline's paintings that maintains its integrity even when it threatens collapse—this is his great strength. Anfam dismisses Greenberg's description by citing the "magnificently ragged" *Painting No. 2* (1954), as if Kline were incapable of a failed painting. (It also makes one wonder whether dismissing Greenberg has ever been so fashionable.) Even so, Kline's compositional gift was graphic, not painterly. Leafing through the catalogue—one of the most stylish I've ever seen—one is taken aback by how good the work can look in reproduction. Indeed, the catalogue kept leading me back to the paintings for a second look. But glossy surfaces are only a front for dead ones, and the paintings disappoint.

Those who think Kline's use of "American-scale" canvases definitive may well ask themselves why his small drawings constitute his best work. Done in a hastily calligraphic style, the drawings have a verve to them that the paintings can only intimate. Kline may have disparaged comparisons of his work to calligraphy, but the drawings work precisely because they are calligraphic: here his line has vigor, activating the pictorial ground. Kline used his drawings as studies for his larger works-on-canvas, but was unable to make the transition to painting convincingly. Indeed, the drawings have a freshness that makes one realize how perfunctory the paintings can be.

Seen in context, Kline's paintings can look consequential. If memory serves correctly, the Whitney once had an installation of its permanent collection wherein they smartly played a Kline painting off a Mark di Suvero sculpture. But, seen *en masse*, Kline's work (like a lot of Abstract Expressionist painting) is impressively tiresome. His reputation, like that of de Kooning, operates largely on myth. (Does anybody really *look* at these paintings anymore?) Unlike de Kooning, however, Kline was an artist of meager talents, a minor artist working in a major mode. Undoubtedly, "Black & White" will receive a predictable chorus of critical huzzahs. But that will say more about a need for cultural icons than it will about the complexities of art.

Exhibition notes

"Italian Renaissance Architecture:
Brunelleschi, Sangallo, Michelangelo"
at the National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.
December 18, 1994—March 19, 1995

For those of us who missed last summer's sumptuous exhibition of Renaissance architecture in Venice, the much reduced version of the show at the National Gallery, Washington, is consoling. It offers a glimpse of the complex, often tortuous history of the construction of three paradigmatic buildings of the Renaissance—the cathedrals of Florence and Pavia, and St. Peter's, Rome—with drawings, engravings, quotations from Renaissance commentators, and, most dramatically, fourteen spectacular architect's models. It's all absorbing—from preliminary sketches to finished records, from carefully measured studies to meticulous renderings of the models, as well as views of the neighborhoods before and after the erection of the buildings. But the real stars of the show are the elegant, lovingly crafted wooden models: Antonio da Sangallo's monumental vision of his proposal for St. Peter's, the largest surviving example from the period; Filippo Brunelleschi's sturdy model for the drum and dome of the Duomo of Florence, a workman-like object with little decorative detail; Michelangelo's model for the vault of the south apse of St. Peter's. And more. (The proximity of the National Gallery's fine collection of Renaissance paintings is an added bonus.)

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The models were made to show patrons what they might expect, and also to test or perfect a design, to guide workmen, and to estimate the amount of material required. They are appealing as joinery and as miniature visions of a Renaissance ideal, but their real fascination lies not merely in their anticipation of actuality but, in some instances, their preservation of intentions never realized. (Michelangelo, berating himself for not having supervised the construction of the south apse closely enough, bemoaned the errors and delays that resulted from this lapse, but noted that "the model, such as I make for everything, was exact.")

The models and drawings are witnesses to the moment when artists, whether painters, sculptors, or architects, declared themselves to be no longer anonymous craftsmen but particular individuals with personal visions —particular individuals who boasted of their command of a new visual language compounded equally of invention, the study of nature, and scrupulous interrogation of what remained of classical antiquity. The models and drawings are witnesses as well to the disputes and rivalries that raged between these artists.

The splendor and size of Sangallo's model attests to his long reign as principal architect of St. Peter's, yet it's obvious that the present building has as little to do with his conception as Sangallo's model does with Donato Bramante's original scheme. As built, St. Peter's owes most to Michelangelo, himself greatly influenced by Bramante. Appointed architect-in-chief to the papacy after Sangallo's death, Michelangelo immediately tried to undo much of what had been begun by his predecessor. According to Vasari (and the exhibition's wall texts) he faulted Sangallo's model for "its innumerable projections, pinnacles, and divisions of members," claiming that it seemed "more like a gothic work than of the good antique manner, or of the cheerful and beautiful modern style." Bramante's plan, Michelangelo claimed, was superior, and from the evidence of the model, the criticism seems just. Yet Michelangelo's strongest argument was not an aesthetic one: Sangallo's proposed ambulatory would, he asserts, take all light away from Bramante's plane, leaving "so many dark, lurking places above and below that they afford ample opportunities for innumerable rascalities, such as the hiding of exiles, the coining of base money, the ravishing of nuns . . ." (The partially completed ambulatory was removed.)

Perhaps the most revealing models in the show are those for the *ballatoio*, the horizontal band at the juncture of the drum and dome, of the cathedral of Florence, its embellishment left unspecified by Brunelleschi. The winning submission, a collaboration among three Florentine architects, is there, familiar to us from the single segment constructed in 1515. Michelangelo disliked the design and managed to get construction stopped, apparently by promising a grander model, which never materialized. The models for a later competition, for the façade of the cathedral, normally in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, in Florence, are probably the best-known works in the show, but for all their elegant and correct classical reference and elaborate detail, they look no more inspired than they do in their usual setting. Yet given the existing façade, completed in the nineteenth century and unlike any of the models, they suggest interesting possibilities. So does the exuberantly decorated model of the cathedral of Pavia, a record of both Bramante's original scheme and subsequent designs by Cristoforo Rocchi and Giovan Petro Fugazza, among others. The completed cathedral is far more modest than the splendid model, reminding us that modifications provoked by financial constraints are not just modern phenomena.

The show is accompanied by an informative, handsomely illustrated brochure that incorporates almost all of the wall texts. The large, scholarly catalogue, a record of the Venice show, is both a wonderful supplement and a source of discontent, since it emphasizes just how diminished the traveling version of the exhibition is. The translations are, to put it politely, redolent of the original. Why didn't they get whoever did

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the National Gallery's lucid, even eloquently translated wall texts?

"Italian Renaissance Architecture" will travel to the Musée national des monuments français, Paris (Summer 1995), the Neue Berliner Galerie, Altes Museum, Berlin (Fall 1995), and the Royal Academy of Arts, London (Winter 1995–96). A catalogue, *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo*, edited by Henry Millon and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, has been published by Rizzoli (731 pages, $85; $60 paper).

—*Karen Wilkin*

"Thomas Cole: Landscape into History"
at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn,
New York. January 13–April 2, 1995

This exhibition of about sixty works by the English-born American artist Thomas Cole (1801–1848) is the first major overview of his work since the late 1940s. But if Cole's work has not been much in the public eye of late, it has been on the public's—at least the art public's—mind. For the last fifteen years or so, Cole has enjoyed a quiet vogue among those concerned to champion what it has pleased them to call "the American Sublime," a fresh-scrubbed, homegrown version of Romanticism whose sources include the aesthetic writings of Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke and the landscapes of Claude Lorraine and such Dutch masters as Hobbema and Ruysdael. Cole, who came to the United States when he was seventeen, counted Frederic Edwin Church among his pupils and is generally regarded as the major inspiration for the so-called Hudson River School. The popularity of that mid-nineteenth-century phenomenon has helped boost Cole's stock, and it is surprising that he has not hitherto attracted serious attention among curators seeking to please the museum-going public.

The present exhibition, organized jointly by the National Museum of American Art and the New-York Historical Society (which was to have been the New York venue), will surely go a long way toward satisfying the craving for Cole. The works chosen for the exhibition vary widely—indeed, wildly—in quality. At his best, Cole displayed a certain breathless vigor and real feeling for grand prospects; combined with a studied genius for composition—Cole's *arrangement* of objects and zones within his paintings almost always surpasses his draftsmanship—this attachment to uplift enabled him to produce some remarkable pictures. If his most stirring and dramatic landscapes—e.g., *Romantic Landscape with Ruined Tower* (1832–36), *Mount Etna from Taormina, Sicily* (1844), *Landscape, Composition, St. John in the Wilderness* (1827)—often flirt with melodrama, his more restrained efforts—*The Architect's Dream* (1840), *The Gardens of the Van Rensselaer Manor House* (1840)—possess a nearly classic dignity that tempers Cole's penchant for bombast.

Writing about Cole in the late 1940s, Clement Greenberg observed that the more casual one's acquaintance with his work, the more highly one was likely to rate him. At first blush, the exuberance of Cole's painting inclined Greenberg to place him with Eakins, Homer, and Ryder at the top of the American pantheon. Greater familiarity bred greater reservations. Greenberg conjectured that Cole "did not adequately understand his own gift," and there is much in the present exhibition to support that judgment. When Cole was content to paint a landscape, he could produce some lovely work. Individual patches of foliage are quite fetching. Unfortunately, he was addicted to the Ideal, to grandiosity in all its stage-lit, hyperventilated forms, and the more he succumbed to this passion the more his paintings are likely to seem, as Greenberg put it, "too heavy, mechanical, and uniform to permit the canvas to breathe."

The burden of the ideal is especially heavy in Cole's ambitious allegorical sequences, *The Course of Empire* (1834–36) and *The Voyage of Life* (1842). He may have been in hot pursuit of an impossible goal: to blend allegory, which requires great attention to the particular, with the sublime, which requires the surrender of particularity to the

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absolute. "A clear idea," Burke wrote in his book on the beautiful and the sublime, "is another name for a little idea." Maybe so. But large ideas in art are a dangerous thing —dangerous, anyway, to the aesthetic substance of art. It is easy to admire the noble sentiments that went into Cole's grandest works. The problem is suppressing a giggle when contemplating the woodenness of his figures: their every gesture is a pose and their conversation, could one transcribe it, would be full of *Thee*s, *Thou*s, and a baroque scheme of capitalization.

Cole probably should have stuck to the vegetable and mineral kingdoms; animals of all descriptions were beyond him. There are some really lamentable sheep in this exhibition, not to mention a boneless Prometheus bound to his rock and a senile Daniel Boone. Cole's Indians tend to remind one of Fenimore Cooper's Indians, as seen by Mark Twain: the difference between a Cooper Indian and the Indian in front of a cigar store, Twain observed, is not large.

"Thomas Cole" was previously on view at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. (March 18–August 7, 1994), and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut (September 11–December 4, 1994). A catalogue, edited by William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, and with essays by divers hands, has been published by the National Museum of American Art and Yale University Press (186 pages, $50; $29.95 paper).

—Roger Kimball

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Theater

Communism is dead; long live the King!

by Mark Steyn

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* began with an image: a man in bed dying of AIDS. Well, big deal. Been there, done that, seen it off-Broadway and on TV. But Kushner enlarged the image—an angel comes crashing through the bedroom ceiling—and, in that one act, set himself on the path to a Pulitzer, a Tony, and bus-poster fame as a Gap model. According to one of the Pulitzer jurors, *Variety*'s Jeremy Gerard, "*Angels* was in a category by itself in terms of the scope and theatrical imagination it represented." The key word there is "scope": Kushner has always resented the way that most playwrights, unlike novelists, are restricted to two hours of staged traffic management, so, in *Angels*, whenever he found himself in a bind dramatically, he simply raised the stakes. As he sees it, "You fuck up when you chicken out"—and, although he's out, he's no chicken. In your ordinary run-of-the-bath-house gay play, "divine intervention" means the arrival of a Judy Garland impersonator; with Kushner, you start off with yet another enfeebled husk on his sickbed, and, before you know it, you're pitched into a world where God has gone and the angels are incompetent bureaucrats with dark plans to kill off humanity. At one level, *Angels* works in the same way as *Cats*: hey, bud, when have you ever seen anything like *this*?

But, of course, it has higher ambitions. As Kushner said at the time, "If your politics are good enough, your playwriting will be good enough." He meant, one assumes, that the courage of your convictions will carry you through. But the line lends itself to another interpretation: as far as your peers and the arts establishment and fashionable opinion are concerned, if your politics are good enough, let's not be too picky about the playwriting. Half a century from now, the success of *Angels* will seem as bizarre and unfathomable as that of *Abie's Irish Rose* does today. Indeed, if it comes to preposterously well-meaning, moralizing sentimentalists, Kushner probably has the edge over Anne Nichols: her coupling of Jewish Abie and his Irish Catholic Rose is marginally more convincing than Kushner's *un*coupling of the closeted gay Mormon husband and his wife.

The difference is that, in 1922, everyone ridiculed Miss Nichols and scorned her success. Back then, if your heart was in the right place, it didn't necessarily excuse your playwriting. By 1992, though, the AIDS play had stalled: we'd had *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*, when both sheer rage and the mere adumbration of symptoms were still novelties; and ho-hum Main Stem dramas like Richard Greenberg's *Eastern Standard* had settled down to augmenting the role of the token gay with the role of the token HIV-positive gay. It took Kushner to give the disease the dramatic size and significance the campaigners had long claimed for it—"the age of AIDS" and all that—to make it the central theme of an epic national meditation and then, by enlarging his canvas to encompass not only the country but

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the heavens too, to sanctify the condition.

To find the proper theatrical precedent for *Angels*, you have to go back to 1863, and the sensation caused by the arrival of the latest theatrical illusion, the Pepper's Ghost. Every play instantly jumped on the hearse and transformed itself into a spectral melodrama, prompting one Broadway columnist to offer his own spoof theatrical listings guide:

> Wallack's Theatre: *Ghost*;
> New Bowery Theatre: *Ghost*;
> Old Bowery Theatre: *Ghost*;
> Bryant's Minstrels: *Colored Ghost*.

None of these ghost shows has survived, but that's not the point. At the time, America was in the midst of the Civil War and, for the first time, the young Republic had to come to terms with a mortality rate it had never contemplated, as the best and brightest of its youth were wiped out. Today, the Pepper's Ghost effect—an actor's reflection cast on a sheet of glass between stage and audience—would be laughable, but, preoccupied with mortality and the afterlife, theatergoers found the luminous figures parading on stage oddly reassuring. This is precisely the function *Angels in America* fulfills for *its* audience. It takes insignificant, individual death and makes it part of a Civil War; it translates the humiliating attrition of a young, healthy body by a behavioral disease contracted in the most banal way into a front-line sacrifice, part of the great cultural currents swirling across our age, part of a struggle for the nation's soul—against, inevitably, Presidents Reagan and Bush, or, as Kushner with his penetrating Pulitzer pen puts it, "those criminals." It's ridiculous, but it is effective; *ce n'est pas la guerre, mais c'est magnifique*.

With Kushner, size is everything: like a restless frog, he skims across the pond from lily pad to lily pad, clocking up the air miles. Everyone else is standing by the water's edge terrified of dipping their toes. As an example, look no further than *Angels*' successor at the Walter Kerr, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* In these pages in October, apropos *A Perfect Ganesh*, I bemoaned Terrence McNally's inability to set his sights above showtune chit-chat, but, in his latest play here we go again: the biggest laugh is when a musical-theater buff says he's had nightmares about a revival of *The King and I* starring Tommy Tune and Elaine Stritch—a divine intervention, to be sure, but also the sound of a theater feeding on itself. McNally's play is about eight gays weekending at a farmhouse in Dutchess County, and what's depressing is not that they're all gays, but that they're all showfolk: they are the kind of people you meet if you work in the theater; you're grateful that he's raised his horizons sufficiently to locate the play up the other end of the Taconic State Parkway. AIDS is in danger of becoming a metaphor for New York theater: shrunken, emaciated, unable to see beyond the window sill. We live in interesting times, but what do America's dramatists have to say about them?

For that reason, Kushner is worth treasuring and so even is his unsatisfactory play *Slavs!* (New York Theater Workshop). *C'est vraiment la guerre* this time, the big one: the collapse of the Soviet Union—which is what's been happening in the rest of the world while American playwrights have been writing AIDS dramas. With a recycling zeal environmentalists will applaud, Kushner has taken three-quarters of this ninety-minute one-acter from scenes cut from *Angels*: the result is a montage of sketches, babushkas and nomenclature and security guards discoursing on socialism in Moscow, Siberia, and—inevitably—heaven. Kushner has spoken of "a twinned destiny," a "sea change," a "revolution" that is sweeping through both Russia and America. He's never very specific about what he means, so we have to feel our own way. In Russia, though, "revolution" is actual, involving the civilian bombardment of Chechen cities; in America, presumably, "revolution" would be "cultural," involving, say, President Clinton enacting reciprocal-pensions legislation for same-sex couples. On the whole, then, it's best to approach Kushner's "twinned

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destiny" as a post–Cold War update of the "moral equivalence" argument favored by British playwrights of the last thirty years: the most you could ever get Harold Pinter to say against the Soviet Union was that the West was just as bad. That's the trouble with political art: almost all of it turns out to be bunk. In the years after Mrs. Thatcher's election, "artists," who in bourgeois societies always complain that they're not listened to despite the special insight with which they're endowed, churned out one subsidized play after another about the British fascist tyranny but failed to spot anything that *really* happened—like the death of Communism, the resumption of ancient ethnic hatreds, even the bland homogenizing tide of Euro-federalism. For all the political and artistic legacy of these plays, the National and the RSC and the Royal Court might as well have been performing *42nd Street* eight shows a week: at least then they wouldn't have been *wrong*. For me, the hysterical impotence of political drama was best expressed by the finale of Adrian Mitchell's *Love Songs of World War III* at the National Theatre, at which the middle-class audience was led through "Fuck-Off Friday," a song about unemployment concluding triumphantly with:

> I can't wait for that great day when
> Fuck-Off Friday comes to Number Ten.

Slavs! reaches its equivalent ferocity in a Siberian hospital, when the mother of one of the dumb chromosome-damaged "yellow children" lashes out at the visiting Moscow apparatchik: "Fuck this century! Fuck your leader! Fuck the state! Fuck all governments! Fuck the motherland! Fuck your mother, your father and you!" The tone of "Fuck-Off Friday" and of almost all subsidized left-wing British drama is defiant certainty: this we know to be right, and Mrs. Thatcher's election and re-election and re-re-election cannot alter that. The tone of Barbara eda-Young's outburst is the opposite: the anger is empty and aimless; it flares and dies; by the end of it, everything is . . . fucked.

In an earlier scene, deploring the Gorbachev reforms, "the world's oldest living Bolshevik" demands to know: "How are we to proceed without theory?" And you wonder if this isn't more of a dilemma for left-wing Western playwrights than it is for the Russian people. The mood of Lisa Peterson's production is oddly faltering, veering between a glib nihilism and a sort of melancholic ambivalence. It's a voice you don't often hear in the theater: that of the guy who doesn't know. The one production value is the lightly falling snow, a double-edged symbol: it's pure and cleansing but it's also blanking, a blizzard, a white-out. Ideology gave the battleground clear lines—and dramatists prefer a clean, simple structure. Take it away, and you're left with the Vance-Owen partition plan for Bosnia: you can just about figure it out, but you wouldn't want to make a two-act play out of it. When "the world's oldest living Bolshevik" drops dead—the final collapse of ideology, geddit?—a nervous comrade puts it down to excessive debate: "Now I'm calling security," he warns. "And no more metaphors!" Again, you wonder if this isn't the great fear of the dramatist—that, in a world made safe for Western consumerism, there are no symbols, no metaphors; everything just *is*. After all, even the most explicitly political art can be wrenched from its moorings. Think of that old fraud Bertolt Brecht and the best-known song from his blistering, savage text to *The Threepenny Opera*. In the late Eighties, even before the Wall fell, "Mack the Knife" completed its slow inexorable defection and signed up to push hamburgers on television:

> It's the great taste of McDonald's
> Come on, make it . . .
> Mac tonight!

Brecht sells burgers! Well, there's a metaphor—and, like all the best ones, it's accidental. The commercial is artless—and, in the face of artlessness, art has a hard job holding its own. If the content of *Slavs!* is nervous and ambiguous, the form is revealing. *Angels in America*, billed as "A Gay Fan-

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tasia on National Themes," lasted seven hours, two nights, and gave its separate halves the dignified, portentous titles of *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*; the collapse of the Soviet Union merits an hour and a half and gets labeled *Slavs!* At one time, it was the musicals which had the exclamation marks, the final stage in the adaptive process from *Green Grow the Lilacs* to *Oklahoma!*, *The Matchmaker* to *Hello, Dolly!*, or *The Man Who Came to Dinner* to *Sherry!* With the last one, incidentally, the titles tell you everything you need to know about the difference between the play and the musical, between a drama which grows organically and one which runs around expending a lot of phony energy. Eventually, the exclamation mark came to be seen as a premature ejaculation: if the show gets that excited in the title, chances are it's pooped by Act One, Scene Two.

Ah, but surely Kushner's exclamation point is pointedly ironic, an exclamation mark in quote marks? Up to a point. In 1943, off the back of *Pal Joey*, you could probably find Richard Rodgers fans willing to argue that *Oklahoma!*'s exclamation was ironic—as, come to think of it, in those days, *any* exclamation mark after Oklahoma must have been. As it happens, *Slavs!* and *Oklahoma!* have more than their punctuation in common: they're both set among fractious, feuding communities trying to find enough common ground on which to build a new state. This may seem a frivolous comparison, but it's prompted by Kushner's form. The play opens with two roly-poly, whiskery, headscarfed babushkas discussing the present state of affairs as they sweep the still-falling snow outside the Hall of the Soviets: "However reluctant one may be to grant it," growls one, "history and the experience of this century presses upon us the inescapable conclusion that there is a direct continuum from dictatorship of the proletariat and the embrace of violence as a means of effecting change that one finds in later Marx and Engels to dictatorship plain and simple—you missed a spot—and state terror."

This is a good joke, but it's a revue joke: thirty years ago in London and New York, it would have been the province of shows like *Beyond the Fringe*. So the question follows: in what way is Kushner's joke more than revue? There is a ratchet effect in our culture: revue has gone; and "Saturday Night Live" satirizes not the news but merely its forms of transmission—the press conferences and network anchors; and so we go to new plays by Pulitzer Prize–winning authors to hear harmless little university jests. It's a comfortable joke, easy to laugh at, like the old comrades called Antedilluvianovich and other funny names leaping round the samovar in the next scene. Much of what Kushner has to say is thoughtful and unsettling, but his play doesn't unsettle because of its form. When John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim used a revue structure for *Assassins*, it had a kind of logic. Here, it feels inappropriate and parochial—and, opening as Yeltsin bombs Grozny, an inadequate response. The playwriting is still not good enough.

You can't entirely blame Kushner. The final stage of the Cold War was fought in pop-culture slogans. Gennadi Gerasimov announced the replacement of the Brezhnev Doctrine by the Sinatra Doctrine: you do it your way; a State Department official, struggling to keep tabs on the collapsing dominoes, said, "If it's Tuesday, it must be Czechoslovakia." This is nothing new in America, where we're happy to define the national tragedy of a terminated Presidency in terms of a Lerner and Loewe title song. But, if anything represented the final capitulation of stolid, non-vernacular Marxist–Leninism, it was not what the Sinatra Doctrine meant but how it was expressed.

For much of this century, there was a uniquely American tension between popular culture and high art. That's gone now: pop culture is all, and the highbrow fellows are left with nothing to do but beam it back to us through a distorting lens. For my own part, I have a simple philosophy: eliminate the middle man. I'd rather have a Campbell's Soup can than a Warhol rendering of one,

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and I'd rather dance to old Beach Boys records than go watch a contemporary dance ensemble doing technique-free movement to old Beach Boys records. There's something snide and joyless about the way the higher forms drape their ironic inverted commas around harmless schlock: a happy gamboling lamb dressed as mutton.

Down at the Public Theater, they've finally cottoned on to Elvis and given him a play of his own, by the actor Christopher Walken—one act, ninety minutes, just like the fall of the Soviet Union. The title is *Him*, which is appropriately Godly: if the play's about anything, it's about Elvis as religion. The King is in Limbo, but a Limbo populated by Elvis look-alikes and apparently accessible to *Vanity Fair* interviewers (no doubt the Limbo press agent insists on picture approval). Already, it's all beginning to sound a bit forced. The night I attended, the audience had been expecting to have a better time—a play about Elvis: hey, it's the great taste of legitimate theater now in new easy-to-swallow capsule form! Oh, there were a few real laughs on "Would you like a donut?" and "Give me five orders of double cheeseburgers with onion rings"—the usual stuff—but for the rest of the time there were just those nervous titters you usually get at the start of a play when the audience is waiting for it to find its rhythm. This one never does, mainly because Walken and his director, Jim Simpson, seem to take a perverse delight in just shambling around the stage and grinding the evening to a halt. There's a set-piece where he walks out of the auditorium to show an audience plant the gun he was given by Nixon; after a while, he and the stooge return, and Elvis/Walken declares, "He broke the fourth wall!" But a lot of the rest of the time he just halts at the end of a line as if he can't believe he said something that clever: "*Je regrette ri-en*. In the end, the love you take *is* equal to the love you make." By this stage, Walken is dressed as a waitress: Elvis has faked his death, been taken to Morocco and turned into a woman.

The trouble is, when you fight on this turf, the real Elvis will always win. To many of his fans, he *is* a religion, a Presleyterian Church with its own sacred relics—toenail clippings retrieved from the shagpile of the Jungle Room at Graceland and a huge wart removed when he entered the army but preserved by the doctor, though there are those who doubt its provenance. Any cult whose adherents sell toenails to each other is bound to prove difficult to satirize. But there are other aspects of Elvis worth considering. Traditionally, the pop celebrity gets rich, buys a house in Beverly Hills and a penthouse on Central Park West, starts collecting fine art and eating haute cuisine. When Elvis got rich, he just did all the things poor people do but on a grand scale: instead of eating one cheeseburger, he'd eat ten; instead of watching one TV set, he'd watch five; instead of living in a trailer, he bought an old plantation home but turned it into a virtual shrine to trailer taste; save for the army, he never went abroad and never had any desire to. Even his records: if you listen to the later ones, the backing arrangements sound like karaoke night at a sports bar. Smart people—the sort who go to the Public Theater—mock him because he never broke faith with his fans, he never crossed the tracks. By comparison, Madonna—for all that she's photographed writhing naked on top of her Doberman—is a far more conventional celebrity.

You might just conceivably get a play out of this, but it certainly isn't Walken's series of disconnected, whimsical verbal guitar licks, which manage, like many arty takes on pop culture, to seem both pretentious and parasitic. Elvis's connection to his audience is so direct, there's no room for art to intercede. When you ask his fans why they like him, they'll say, "Oh, well, I'll never forget the first time I heard 'Rock-A-Hula Baby.'" And that's it. Honestly. It's only a problem for playwrights, who, like that old Bolshevik, can't conceive of a world without theory, without metaphor, without symbols: there must be more to it than that. But sometimes there isn't. Elvis is mainly a symbol of Elvis.

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Dance

Promises, promises

by Laura Jacobs

It's never been much fun writing about choreography by Bill T. Jones. It was easier when he worked with Arnie Zane, co-founder of the dance company they shared. Jones was tall, black, and statuesque and Zane was short, white, and weasely. Neither was a born dancer with a born dance body and the work they did together was like a Hope and Crosby road movie: they made it up as they went along—posturing, pontificating, parodying. It was two guys who knew nothing about making dances making dances. Zane was the better mover; quick, sly, a sort of dance-department pickpocket, wedges and squiggles pinched from the air. Jones was lumbering, lagging behind, his lumpy muscles somehow in the way. The twosome was openly gay, and soon had a following that was looking for an alternative dance by alternative dancers. Their biggest hit together was called *Secret Pastures* (1984), a Frankenstein story in which Jones was the fabricated man, Zane the feisty scientist. I remember *Pastures* as zany, apolitical, a parable of the ways the dance-illiterate Jones was being honed for civilization.

And zoned too. Because in the years since *Pastures* had its première at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, since Zane died of AIDS in 1988 and Jones himself announced he was HIV-positive, Jones has continued to work in a territory of experiment. Citing "dogma" as the stifling signifier of the dance scene, he has remained on-purpose dance-illiterate. You might describe him as amateur avant-garde. Though he moves better than he used to, the pieces he choreographs still look like they were made by a beginner who took from books what you can only learn by doing. Wearing his defiance like a chasuble, he has emerged as a sort of footlights preacher-man, satisfying officialdom that his growls and pounces, his sexed-up genuflections, his curling lip behind totemic masks, are a fire and brimstone that have meaning. A button-pusher in the manner of Madonna, that self-acknowledged legislator of the world!, Jones makes work that attempts to rattle us out of our complacency—he's a shake-down shaman. Humming hostility is the energy he brings to the stage, and brooding quiet—he's more interesting when standing still or giving curtain speeches than when moving.

But a mean curtain speech goes a long way these days. The press release announcing December's Brooklyn Academy of Music performances of *Still/Here* began: "1994 could be called the year of Bill T. Jones," and indeed the press kit was crammed with four-color clips, cover stories, and—drum roll—that monumental puffball of a *New Yorker* preview piece by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which may have set a new precedent for highbrow hype and most certainly triggered Arlene Croce's brilliant blast at hype's circling satellites: victim art, the grants game, our TV nation. Sifting through the press material was more like watching MacNeil/Lehrer than reading about dance. Tasteful

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reporting, plaintive political summation, cultural context, profile information—but where was *Still/Here*? There were descriptions of the dance in workshop, of what happens onstage, and actual lines of text that are heard or sung. But a formal sense of the dance itself? It seems that other critics aren't having fun writing about choreography by Bill T. Jones either.

Jones's star rose in the same decade as Mark Morris's, and there are similarities between the two dancers in sexual orientation and chest-pounding irreverence and even, curiously, the use of sign language in their work. But Morris was never above or irreverent about craft. He actively learned to stitch steps in the master tradition, and while the later work often disappointed (especially after similar BAM media gluts), the early excitement of seeing dances built from the floor up, with an almost divine spark of time and place, and an acute coherence that could not help but pull a writer into its snapping synapses, was honestly won. Jones, meanwhile, was still cracking eggs. He never picked up the rudiments of the enchainement, or cared to understand how one step follows another to become a phrase, an articulation, an image, a shape within a rhythm, a vision within a shape that you can actually remember and play over in your mind and call a dance. Perhaps he was too interested in talking his ideas.

Morris, of course, could spin out enchainements till he was blue in the face, and he took as his cues not only music but also text to music. He leaned on these too heavily. But do not underestimate an audience's pleasure in "association" or the way an artist learns to refine and nuance such blunt beginnings. When Morris used signing or made visual pictures that mimed a libretto, you saw the layering technique and felt the cognitive tension between two dimensions (abstract language and the concrete body), which thickened and quickened the dance and pointed to more sophisticated expression down the road. Jones's sign language, however, is without correspondences to any other vocabulary, makes no visual associations (think Jodie Foster's Nell!). It's an obtuse semaphore system of hand shapes and gestures, often accompanied by discussions that sound like Karen Finley in a quizzical mood and distract from any sense of flow. The dances wear a gloss of huffing, puffing intent and are performed with a professional gleam. "Well, at least *he* must know what he's doing," you think as you sink into your seat.

With all the flurry of hyperbole surrounding *Still/Here*, the hosannas in *Newsweek* and reports of footstomping audiences in Lyon, I went to BAM thinking, okay, maybe it's a breakthrough. The last Jones piece performed there had been *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*—a typical Jones/Zane title in its hip conflation of too many ideas, its persecution complex, and its outsized scale of effort. What I remember of that evening, again, is not a dance (actually, not even a step) but a pile-up of theatrical strategies, chief among them Jones wandering through asking ethical questions of an actual priest. *Last Supper* was really mass performance art; it climaxed with a stream of naked dancers, running and bouncing, showing us their . . . equality—how, with our clothes off, we are all naked.

Still/Here takes place in the same pseudo-philosophical space as *Last Supper*, only its community is vulnerable in a different way: it is mortality we share, and don't you forget it. For this piece Jones set up workshops around the country in which he talked to people who had diseases from which they probably would not recover. Tapes from these workshops are arranged into an aural score, spliced into gray chamber music, and lines from the tapes have been elaborated into urgent songs sung live by gravel-voiced Odetta. The first half of the dance, "Still," presents the dancers as "characters" from the tapes; each comes forward and strikes defining poses, a sort of valiant Voguing. Then to voices discussing diagnosis, denial, and "slash, poison, or burn" as treatment choices, dancers tackle one another to show the assault of illness, or engage in reaching-

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out gestures of comfort, cradling, hand holding, and sympathy, a Hallmark ritual that strains both eye and mind.

Incessant video business by Gretchen Bender gives you something to look at once you realize that Jones's "choreography" hasn't developed a jot; it's his own memory-defying, anti-dance dogma: the parade of poses, the disconnected steps (belligerent squats, karate kicks) worked into depthless lines across the stage. Cobalt-blue screens glow in the dark; speeded up slide shows of diseased body parts flash in grotesque REM spectacles; filmed images of dancers are distorted to make them look like spreading solar systems; identical medical-book drawings of pink hearts beat on five screens. It's a high-tech check-up; your own personal future shock (prognosis: poor). In the evening's second part, "Here," the movement is pitched higher and more violent. The body parts flash faster. The lighting goes a garish yellow, and a video monitor is wheeled in, Jones's face on the screen (his only appearance in *Still/Here*). The evening ends in an orgy of heavy-metal squalling, the dancers wildly circling Jones's screen image, a talking head saying nothing.

The promised land—it was part of the title of Jones's last big piece and the idea recurs here in this final shot of dancers revelling round their boob-tube Aaron, waiting for the word that doesn't come. The one true moment in the evening, it reminds me of the promise held out through Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, the secret future that the angel is going to impart, but in six hours of stage time never does because Kushner's arguments alone can't take us there—the writing has to do that, and, like Jones, technically he's not up to it. Art does tell truths and secrets, but rarely in big block letters, clever rant, or video speechifying. Answers are folded into textures, into the flights and private follies of an advancing technique, and into moments that are structured strongly enough that we can recall them as phenomena, as places in nature.

I think of Paul Taylor's *Company B*, a hit from 1991 set to light, jazzy, jiggly wartime tunes by the Andrews Sisters—songs now slick with nostalgia. Working in the jitterbug idioms of the Forties, Taylor spins out dazzling variations on the theme of love as war, a metaphor expressing the violence of desire, the race against time, men falling and falling again. The dance is a pop romp, yet through the use of silhouette and slow motion in the background, elegy filters in, creating a dark zone "over there." And then Taylor crosses the threshold to another over-there. In the dance "I Can Dream, Can't I," behind an agitated solo for one woman, two men move in mirror step, a backdrop to her longing, a soldierly frieze: for only a second one of them half-turns to fully face the other, and in that nearly missable second, so effortlessly achieved and dramatically fine, the dance is charged, completed in the present tense. It's a different dance now, not about then but always, the daily destructions born boisterously in our blood.

I also think of Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994), which was performed last May at The Kitchen and repeated there in December. An attempt to make art that holds hard formally, acknowledging a dire diagnosis and a stream of dying friends without getting lost in loss, Greenberg presents a nose-to-the-grindstone work of unrelenting, interlocking, deep-lunged dance. Costumed in spartan white shorts and tops, situated in a duskily lit black-box space, the only props a naked branch and a sword—the piece is wintry, isolated, yet heated with concentration, hurtling forward. On the back wall white titles, sometimes witty, tell of events, fears, and deaths that happened during the making of the dance. The only backward glance occurs when Greenberg arranges himself into a careful picture, behind him the words "This is how my brother Jon looked in a coma." The intimacy of the moment is stabbing, an ache moated by the abstraction around it, ennobled by Greenberg's classical stance, its echo through centuries of premature deaths. Two months later, this spare dance stands clearer and taller in memory,

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like white marble columns, an ode to stoicism.

Mass dying of the young is a new subject for our time, but it is not a new subject historically, nor has it always been expressed literally. One of the great "march on" dances of the century is Sir Frederic Ashton's *Symphonic Variations*, a strange work that Ashton plotted while in the RAF, his head in the clouds. Having plunged into mysticism during the war (St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross), Ashton came back to the Sadler's Wells studio with an eccentric four-seasons scenario sketched to music by César Franck (a sentence from Part 4: "Art and Faith united in one unseverable bond"). The ballet emerged, however, as a plotless work for six dancers. The backdrop was lemony green, a swooping curve that might be an enlarged site on a war map, and the dancers' white tunics and headpieces suggested sylvan sculptures come to life—Veritas in toe shoes.

Technically painstaking, the ballet calls for rushes of raw strength checked within pristine, almost antiquated stanzas—you might call it a rite of spring inside a requiem. *Symphonic Variations*' syntactical precision seems, for Ashton anyway, a kind of life itself, art's answer to disaster. You want to see it again immediately, to reread that language, return to that unity. Watching an aggressive muddle like *Still/Here*, you'd rather make a break for it. We're all going to suffer and die is its one-note refrain. And that, we already knew.

Editor's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each.
A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

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The media

A rose for Anna

by James Bowman

She disappeared in the dead of winter. Just when we needed her most, she was gone. In the month after the election she showed what she might have made of the Newt World Order, had she been spared to us. She prayed for the health of Al Gore (why not Bill Clinton, I wonder?) lest, catastrophe having overtaken the president and vice president, the country's chief magistracy should devolve on Mr. Gingrich, whom she characterized as going "straight for the neck flesh, calling names, talking trash, practicing his patented brand of 'I'm-O.K.-You're-Scum' attack politics." But even as she herself was calling names at the neck flesh, the mood turned elegiac. The true significance of November 8th, she opined, was that "this country lost its two most compelling and charismatic political figures when Mario Cuomo was rejected by the voters of New York and Ann Richards by those in Texas."

Heavy losses, no doubt, but not nearly so heavy as the loss of Anna Quindlen from the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. We the connoisseurs of journalistic bibblebabble and huftymagufty can all agree that the day that Anna Q retired to pursue a career in writing fiction was a dark cold day. The connoisseurs of fiction can probably agree too. But she left us with a true gem of its kind: a masterpiece of malarkey and a paragon of poppycock. Her valedictory column, which she informed us she had long been meaning to write, was such a magnificent specimen of all that we have come to expect of her over the years that I cannot forbear from commenting on it in detail.

Entitled "Every Day, Angels," it begins with an obituary which ran in the *Times* back in October 1992 of one Harold Brown, Sr., a businessman who also established a homeless shelter in his local church. What her connection with Mr. Brown is is not made clear, but we learn that he is being plucked from obscurity more than two years after his death in order to illustrate Miss Quindlen's contention that "the great issues of the day," on which she has ostensibly been commenting for five years, are, "at base," but one issue, and that the same as it was in John the Baptist's time. Also the same as it was in Charles Dickens's time and Anne Frank's time. All three in this unlikely trio, thinks Anna, would have agreed that greedy and selfish people (you know who you are, Newt Gingrich!) are the only "great issue" worth bothering about.

Among some trifling prophecies and rather overheated predictions of wrath to come, John the Baptist said: "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none." Very much in the same vein, it would seem, Charles Dickens had the ghost of Jacob Marley instruct his erstwhile partner, Ebenezer Scrooge, that "the common welfare" of mankind was his business—i.e., not making money for himself. Both John the B and Dickens are associated with Christmas, and it was in what used to be known as the Christmas season that Miss Quindlen bade

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her readers farewell. But so as to avoid too sectarian a note in her holiday seasonal message, she included as another latter-day equivalent of the Baptist's message Anne Frank's faith that "In spite of everything . . . people are really good at heart." *Quindlen erat demonstrandum.*

Now the point of Mr. Brown's presence in this august company is to show that even businessmen are capable of charity and bigheartedness—and of inspiring our Anna to new heights of perfervid prose:

> Like Ebenezer Scrooge, I've walked the streets, seen goodness in the dark places, and shed the frosty rime that's said to come with my profession. I've visited the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Manhattan where every day volunteers feed 1,000 hungry people, and the York Street Project in Jersey City, home and school alike for women looking for a second chance. I've been to schools where teachers bring imagination and intellect to life, and hospitals where the nurses bring comfort and joy.

Of all the people who have ever walked the streets and seen goodness in dark places, Ebenezer Scrooge would seem to be the least likely example, but even less likely is his having "shed the frosty rime that's said to come with my profession." As well to say "shed the wet water that's said to come" with her profession. What "profession" does she share with Scrooge, and who ever was fool enough to say that "frosty rime" would "come with" it? What would it mean if frosty rime *did* come with it? Are the schools where teachers bring imagination and intellect to life and the hospitals where nurses bring comfort and joy special schools and hospitals, to be distinguished from the general run of the things by their life and joy? Or are they just any old schools and hospitals where, as in Scrooge's "dark places," the life and joy can be found only if, like Anna, you know where to look?

We do not know. We can only submit to be swept along with our ignorance on the torrent of Anna's eloquence.

> This morning I could visit Tavern on the Green, where the Robin Hood Foundation is having its annual breakfast. Founded by three anti-Marleys, Wall Street traders who cleaned up big time in the 80's and decided to invest in empathy, the foundation gives money to groups that shelter, feed and fight for the city's poor. Leaders of those groups will speak of their work, and the who's who audience will, as always, be dazzled by the simple spectacle of unabashed humanity.

What makes the Wall Street traders anti-Marleys? Marley (actually his ghost) was the greedy businessman who *repented* and urged charity on Scrooge. Are these charitable businessmen anti-repentance? Anti-charity? Anti-ghost? And what does it mean to "invest in empathy"? What sort of return do they expect on that particular investment, I wonder? Is it true to say that a "who's who audience" is *always* "dazzled" by "unabashed humanity"? Even most of the time? I suppose they might be if it were suddenly revealed to them that shares in empathy were likely to pay off, but surely *that* can't happen every day? And why is the humanity unabashed? Why should it be abashed in the first place? If it were, would it really be humanity? Never mind. Anna goes on:

> They do dazzle, the everyday angels, just as the angel did in the Christmas story, scaring the wits out of the shepherds. But the angel said "Fear not," and that's what I've learned from its contemporary counterparts—the rape counselors, the good cops, the nuns, the librarians. Life will be hard, politics will be mean, money will be scarce, bluster will be plentiful. Yet somehow good will be done.

As it happens, we can well believe that Anna Quindlen goes around in a perpetual state of dazzlement, but it is hard to imagine that it is because she spends so much time with rape counselors and good cops (note the dark hint that a lot more cops than nuns or librarians are maybe not so good). It's one thing when the angels come to tell you that an event unique in all human history has

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happened. On such an occasion they may be expected to dazzle a bit. Also to make those who observe them afraid—hence the reassurance, "Fear not." Anna's angels, by contrast, are "everyday" ones, so that presumably people like her cannot perform the most ordinary tasks without what to anyone else would be the annoyance of their dazzle.

The injunction to "Fear not" appears not to refer the terrifying quality of the angels themselves but to the nasty things that they are there to protect us from. These are warm and cuddly rather than fearsome angels. They might not do so well as the biblical ones at expressing majesty and awe, should they ever be called upon to do so, but Anna likes them better this way, even though their reassurance is no more than the vague, impersonal "somehow good will be done." As Horatio might have said to Hamlet, "There needs no angel, my lord, come from heaven to tell us this." Life may be hard, politics mean, money scarce, and bluster plentiful for a great many people in the world, but only the last is true in Anna's case. She sounds just the tiniest bit glib in promising everybody else this "somehow" good.

> I've been lucky [she goes on] to be in this business at a time that was infinitely interesting, when women were more welcome. I've been lucky to work at a newspaper that stands for the very best that newspapers can provide, lucky to have had a conversation in print with millions of familiar strangers. I've gone places I never would have gone, met people I never would have met.

Really? *Infinitely* interesting? The more you think about that qualifier, they more you wonder what it is there for. Perhaps she only means that they are *exhaustively* interesting, that she is so interested in them that she has no interest left over for other times and places. But is this a recommendation of the times (or the *Times*) or a derogation from the quality of her own intellect? We must suppose that the people who find their own times most interesting— if still less than infinitely so—are those who have the least sense of historical perspective. Is it then mere coincidence that Anna is deprecating precisely that perspective in her demure feminist reference to the less than exemplary history of the *Times* from a feminist point of view? More welcome than what? Well, we won't go into that.

In her haste to get off the subject, however, she slips into an egregious lie. I refer not to the alleged fact that *The New York Times* "stands for the very best that newspapers can provide," though some would pounce on that one immediately, but to her alleged "conversation in print with millions of familiar strangers." If she has ever had a conversation in print it has been with one or two familiar strangers. Millions of them would take up a great many volumes of print, and, prolific though Anna has been, she has not been that prolific. That this lie is so open and shameless suggests to me that she really means not that she has had conversations in print but that she has *preached* in print to the millions of familiar strangers —as well as one or two strange familiars and at least some thousands of those, like me, whose wish she has made it to be stranger still. She just thought it sounded better to call her preaching a conversation—as, indeed it does—though that does not *make* it a conversation.

> The greatest of them [that is the people she would never otherwise have met] are these: Ellen Baxter, Al Cohall, Steven McDonald, all the others— you know who you are.

I know who I am anyway!

> You stand in opposition to a spiritual isolationism that makes icicles of our insides and a hard little lump of coal of our hearts. "Karma is a boomerang," it says on the tip cup at a Village coffee bar. If we do not reach out, it is we who will be alone.

Why isolationism rather than isolation? If the rest of our insides are icicles, how did our hearts get to be coal, hard or soft? Not

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exactly an arresting picture there. But what the imagery lacks in imaginative force, it makes up in triteness. At least, Anna is usually original, as she proves in her introduction of the tip cup at a Village coffee bar. Like the late Mr. Brown or the everyday angels or the familiar strangers, the tip cup is so homely a presence in Anna Quindlen's moral gallery that we wonder what it is doing there. Why are these things on show, we ask—I mean rather than some other things? Wherefore do we wrap the gentleman in our more rawer breath? And how is our sense of the profundity of the message that "Karma is a boomerang" enhanced by the knowledge that it appears on a tip cup?

It would be nice to know, because otherwise the message seems to be little more than a tautology—like saying that the flu will knock you out. Anyone who knows what karma is will know of its boomerang-like qualities; anyone who does not will be no wiser for the instruction that it is like a boomerang. Yet in a peculiarly Quindlenian way, the motto sort of fits with the equally meaningless principle which follows it—"If we do not reach out, it is we who will be alone." This is very possibly true, but if we do not reach out, is it not because we *want* to be alone?

> The great issues [Anna begins her peroration] are the same as they were when 15-year old Anne Frank, three weeks shy of discovery in her attic hideaway, less than a year from death in Bergen-Belsen, wrote in her shabby plaid diary: "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

Can there ever have been a more inappropriate use of the colloquial "shy" to mean "short"? But dragging in Anne Frank here in a column which purports to be about everyday angels sounds like a desperate move. It is not helped, either, by the following angelic greeting:

> Fear not; Anne was right. The heavenly hosts prove it every day, in Coney Island, in Washington Heights, in Flushing, with cots, with comfort, with boxes of tissues on their desks.

There is some confusion as to who is the angel here. It is ostensibly the heavenly hosts with the cots and the boxes of tissues on their desks, but it is Anna who, angel-like, proclaims "Fear not." Or is it Anne Frank, under whose aegis the proclamation is made but who might have been less inclined than Anna to dismiss fearful things or to be much reassured by the existence of miscellaneous facilitators and counselors? This confusion is deliberate. Really, Anna thinks, everybody is an angel—which is, not accidentally, a way of trivializing the angelic. The message of the heavenly host to the shepherds is part of the irrelevant past which has been marginalized by the "infinitely interesting" present. What, after all, is the news that Christ the Savior is born compared to the news that some middle-aged divorcée in a rape crisis center knows exactly how one feels?

> I leave you with good tidings of great joy [Anna concludes modestly]: Those who shun the prevailing winds of cynicism and anomie can truly fly.

Once again: a lie. They cannot *truly* fly, and if they could, how could they shun the prevailing winds? One can imagine a wind of cynicism, which is spoken, but a wind of anomie diminishes the force of the word. Anyway, anomie is less like a prevailing wind than a hurricane. But can either hurricanes or prevailing winds be shunned, whether we fly or not? Well, with Anna all things are possible. But why would the shunners want to fly in the first place? Are they not the same as those who man the soup kitchens? Is not their business as down to earth as Scrooge's? Where would they want to fly *to*? What would they want to fly *for*?

I guess that such flight is for the sheer thrill of it—that flying is a metaphor for the state of spiritual exaltation which must be well known to Anna Quindlen herself when, as she so often is, she is swept away by the force of her own windy rhetoric. My own

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suspicion is that, Anna's airborne do-gooders notwithstanding, we are no more likely to be buzzed by low-flying angels than we ever were. But I also suspect that that is the very reason that she feels so comfortable arrogating to herself the privilege of repeating the angelic message for our times and adapting it to her own purposes.

Alas, she will do so no more, at least not in the *Times*. She has become her admirers, as Auden said of Yeats, and her words "are modified in the guts of the living." Thus it was that in the post-Christmas doldrums there appeared among the various stock-takings and philosophical reflections brought in to fill the hole that Anna had left on the op-ed page unmistakable traces of her influence. Frederick Buechner, for instance, an unlikely combination of Presbyterian minister and novelist, was of the opinion that "It's not so much the terrible things"—by which he means Bosnia, Haiti, AIDS, homelessness, crime, "and the rest of it"—which are "decimating" us as it is our "obsession" with or "addiction" to the news of them.

"Decimating," you might think, is strong language, but none too strong to express the Rev's view of "the likes of" Rush Limbaugh and the Christian Right. They, it seems, are constantly being rude to Mr. Clinton who, the Reverend Mr. Buechner believes, is "arguably the most promising leader we have had for years." Arguably? Isn't it argument rather than decimation he is getting from Mr. Limbaugh and the Christian Right? Not as he sees it. The very word "Christian," he says, "no longer conjures up the image of Christ but rather the narrow, bigoted, authoritarian political faction that calls itself after him." Presumably he is not talking about the Presbyterian church. As a representative of that august body, the Rev's alternative to the n., b., a.p.f. which has usurped the name of Christian goes like this:

> I suspect that God will not kick the world to pieces, if only because if that was on His mind, He would probably have done something about it long since. But those like me who believe in God spend a lot of time asking themselves what He is doing in the world *instead*—this world where He is so often most conspicuous by what seems like his [*sic*] absence. The other day I was handed a card with these words: "Prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people. People change things." If one substitutes "God" for "prayer" and can overcome a distaste for slogans, maybe that comes as close to suggesting the answer as anything else could.

I, for one, was enormously impressed by the Rev. Buechner's distaste for slogans, as I was by his theological sophistication in explaining that "contrary to widespread religious belief" God does not make good things happen to good people and bad things to bad ones. (Exactly how widespread is that belief, I wonder?)

But above all I found myself lost in admiration for his sensitivity, so sensitively displayed in an account of how he wept salt tears at a televisual depiction of the townsfolk of Union, South Carolina, bringing flowers to the shore of the lake wherein Mrs. Susan Smith recently drowned her two sons—tears not only for the children but "maybe even for the unimaginable, or all too imaginable, mother." Those tears were his Christmas epiphany—a moment of, well, something special:

> My guess is that it doesn't matter all that much what one calls such moments, but it does matter immeasurably that we recognize them when we find them, and maybe even follow in the direction they point—toward a true humanness that could save this demon-haunted world, if there is anything, anywhere to save it.

A cry-in against Rush Limbaugh and the Christian Right? I think I can say that such flapdoodle is almost worthy of Anna Quindlen herself, and it gave me new hope to find it again in her own former haunts so soon after she had vacated them. However much the tendency of the age may be toward common sense, there will never be any shortage of foolishness in the *Times*.

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Books

Gass attack

by James Wolcott

William H. Gass has been sitting on *The Tunnel* for quite a while, and I do mean sitting.[1] The author of a previous novel, a dozen or so stories, and several collections of essays, Gass began writing this book in 1966 . . . 1966—the year the Beatles recorded *Revolver*, Michelangelo Antonioni released *Blow-Up*, and Twiggy was fashion's favorite Q-Tip. It was the year Susan Sontag became the sultry star of deep thought with *Against Interpretation*. It was six presidents ago, not counting Clinton. Now the psychedelic skies are gray. The bandannas are all undone. *The Tunnel* reflects the loosy-goosy period in which it was begun and the overriding sense of mission needed to span nearly thirty years of hard mental labor. It isn't so much a novel as a Sisyphean labor, the uphill climb of a downhill life.

The narrator of *The Tunnel* is William Frederick Kohler, a historian and college professor whose magnum opus is called *The Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. "This is to introduce a work on death by one who's spent his life in a chair," Kohler begins, and the phrase "life in a chair" recurs as a lament. The novel has barely begun, and already the narrator is tired. In its opening note of paralysis, *The Tunnel* symptomizes the species of metafiction Tom Wolfe has called "the catatonic novel or novel of immobility." Since Gass has spent almost thirty years sitting in a chair writing an epic book about a character sitting in a chair writing an epic book, it's as if this bulky project was being supported by two sets of buttocks, which still isn't enough padding. "Yes, I've sat too long, no wonder it's painful," Kohler sighs. He's got those big bottom blues.

For Tom Wolfe, the absurd fatalism of faddish metafictions as typified by the Robert Coover story which began, "In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island and shot himself." The absurd gesture in Gass's novel, its *acte gratuit*, is Kohler's mission to stir from his chair and dig a secret tunnel out of his basement. One night, while digging, he strangles the family cat ("I squeezed with a hate of long duration"), another *acte gratuit*, like Merseult's murder of the Arab in *The Stranger*, only dumber. Kohler pops the dead cat into a paper sack, then resumes his mining operation. Since Kohler is the German word for digger, it's as if he digs because his name defines his destiny—he's metaphorical man digging an all-purpose metaphorical tunnel (womb, grave, bunker, time capsule, escape route). But of course Gass's mouthpiece finds it gauche and reductive to assign "meaning" to his act and thus rob it of its rich, engrossing futility. "With my tunnel I have committed the ultimate inactive act. After all, what is a useless hole? I can honestly say I have accomplished Nothing." He's put the zero in Roland Barthes' zero degree writing.

1 *The Tunnel*, by William H. Gass; Knopf, 672 pages, $30.

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In the spirit of Donald Barthelme, another metafictionist influenced by the French *nouveau roman*, *The Tunnel* makes elaborate use of cartoons, diagrams, different typefaces, and bold headlines to break up its self-referential text with nutty distractions, juggling signs and signifiers like silverware. Yet the novel strives to be more than an anti-novel. It aspires to be a permanent splotch on literature's soul, a personal neurosis that attains the status of a cultural condition. Its sensibility is steeped in the thick, shadowed enclosures of Kafka, Céline, Rilke, Joyce, and Proust, all of whom are cited in the text. Like Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul* and Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, *The Tunnel* is an effort to disgorge *The Last Modernist Masterpiece*—to create a super-chunky word-mass in which the sum total of one man's loquacious consciousness expands like the cosmos (and sums up the century).

Down in the dark, Kohler may be an academic version of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, but in drab daylight, he passes for an All-American slob, a high-I.Q. Homer Simpson washed up like a whale in his metaphysical midlife crisis. Overweight and underendowed ("My weenie was, in fact, a little wormlike model of my soul"), Kohler beholds his sagging flesh with disgust. "My eyes are ringed like stumped trees, but fifty years have not consumed the fat I laid up on my chest when young." He beholds his wife Martha's sagging flesh with equal disgust. "Behold the sagging tit, the drudge-gray mopped-out cunt-corked wife . . ." Together, they recoil at the sight of the two mewling brats they have brought into the world. "They stick with their mother, mostly, thank God, though she doesn't fancy them either. After God created snot he made small boys with pugly noses to stuff it in. They show their respect for God's law by picking it out." As you can imagine, meals at the Kohler household are something of a trial.

He's no happier out of the house. Kohler's history-department colleagues are the usual campus zoological specimens, so sneered-at and scrawled that they're like Wyndham Lewis grotesques used for target practice. At faculty meetings, Kohler goggles at them as if peering through a fish-eye lens, the goofy distortions of their features giving them a surface animation. There's Culp with his cartoon voices, Herschel with his big ears, Planmantee with his buggy eyes, Govemali with his pursed lips—a collection of small fry and papier-mâché dummies that make up the most forgettable, interchangeable line-up of supporting characters ever pasted on the page. Gass has never been much of an animator, indeed, disdains the practice. The play of opposing forces, the competitive pursuit of earthly prizes (sex, power, wealth), has no place in his aesthetic, which deems suspense, local color, and character development as cheap ruses and crude stuffing to keep old-fashioned fiction chugging on all fours. "Stories are a bore," he pronounced in the last issue of *Antaeus*. They're moldy and they stink. Or as he put it, "There's bird drop, horse plop, and novel plot."

Even if Gass were as happy to saddle a story as Anthony Trollope, he would soon find himself alone in the pasture. As he admitted in an interview in Joe David Bellamy's 1974 anthology *The New Fiction*, he's constitutionally incapable of creating conflict and byplay between others. "I haven't the dramatic imagination at all. Even my characters tend to turn away from each other and talk to the void." For him, the true conflict is within. "I am (though I wasn't raised as one) a Protestant, wholly inner-directed, and concerned only too exclusively with my salvation, my relation to the beautiful, my state of mind, body, soul. . . . The interactions which interest me tend to be interactions between parts of my own being." Which raises the question, Is Gass sitting on Kohler's lap, or is Kohler sitting on his?

As Gass's alter ego, Kohler is more than a standard misanthrope and killjoy. The big gasper in *The Tunnel* is that this distinguished historian is in fact a Nazi apologist—a fascist nutcase. He keeps a yellowing stash of anti-Semitic propaganda in a trunk,

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makes anti-Semitic asides ("I do two things Jews never do: drink and go down"), and considers Hitler, for all his flaws, history's greatest superstar. Kohler toys with the notion of the cancerous introduction to *Guilt and Innocence* as his own *Mein Kampf*, and ponders starting his own loser brigade, The Party of the Disappointed People, complete with uniforms and armbands. (The PDP banner is displayed in the front of the book.) Through Kohler, Gass can think the unthinkable and say the unsayable. Everything *verboten* can be voiced. As for instance when Kohler says, everybody identifies with the victims of the Third Reich, but no one takes the trouble to put themselves in the other guy's jackboots. Sadists require consideration, too. "[I]t is easy to be a victim, you don't have to do a thing, you simply weep and bleed—but, ah, the beater, to be the beater is not a role whose easy mastery is readily admittable." Moreover, no one ever considers the plus side of Nazi genocide—its contribution to the temporary curtailing of kitsch. "[We] shall never know how many callow effusions we were spared by a cutthroat; how many slanderous tongues were severed; what sentimental love songs were choked off as though in mid-note by the rope; the number of the statues of Jesus, Mary, or the Pope, whose making was prevented by an opportune blindness or the breaking of the right bones; what canvases depicting mill wheels in moonlight, cattle at dawn, children and dogs, lay unexecuted on their easels because of the gas, talent thrown out as if it were the random pissing of paint into a bedpan; so that, over all, and on sober balance, there could have been a decided gain."

Besides (Kohler argues, getting ecological on us, taking a global perspective, gearing up for another spurt of run-on sentences), the body heaps left by the Nazi war machine were a small theater of destruction compared to the worldwide smoke and pollution caused by that rolling coffin, the American automobile—"the world's most effective killing machine, with victims outnumbering any war, with millions maimed, shocked, crazed by the car, half the world trashed by its production, made brutal, ugly, used up, useless, with endless highways and hospitals to maintain, most citizens in debt to their eyes for this toy, only so my father and I and everyone like us could drive about in our insulated canisters and curse one another. Mr. Hitler's Holocaust can't hold a candle. After all, his is kaput. This way to the gasoline, ladies and gentlemen." Six hundred seventy-two pages of this is a lot.

Kohler is not only the German word for digger, it is also (as the narrator reminds us at one point) the brand name for a famous line of plumbing fixtures. When he isn't sitting in his chair, he's sitting on the toilet. He tries to be quiet. "Unfortunately, I fart a lot." A long inventory of a typical Kohler day (it reads like Nicholson Baker without Baker's bemused knack for novelty) begins with a full paragraph describing how the old professor wipes himself after his morning visit, how many sheets of tissues he folds, how he sinks the basket. "I just make a pass and drop the result in the john as if I'd picked up a bug in a glove of Kleenex." Since the personal is political in *The Tunnel*, Kohler's crapulousness (Gass's pun) expresses his notion that everybody and everything begins and ends in crap. I don't take the measurements of my turds, he snarls at his fellow faculty members, and of Planmantee in particular he says, "The waters of forgetfulness shall wash him away like a smear of shit on the enamel." As far as he's concerned progress is illusion, culture is camouflage, politics charts the movement of herds; in the privacy of our stalls, we remain cavemen in a crouch. "Causes collect like waste in the bowels of history. History, in fact, is horse drop, cow plop, nose snot, rope knot, flesh rot, ink blot, blood clot, street shout. Who says I have a loathsome mind? Who dares say so? And every event, then, is somebody's—something's—stool." From Hannah Arendt's banality of evil to Kohler's banality of anality isn't much of an intellectual advance.

Light relief from these ranting solos and

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rhetorical set-pieces is provided by the limericks Gass/Kohler records and composes.

> A nun went to bed with Herr Hitler,
> whose cock just got littler and littler.
> O what I would do
> if you was a Jew,
> he cried as he bit her and hit her.

And:

> A sensitive Nazi at Auschwitz
> was annoyed by rabbinical outfits.
> These habits retard
> the melting of lard,
> which is the reason for being at Auschwitz.

Perhaps this is the proper moment to pause and note that, in his acknowledgments, Gass thanks the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Purdue Research Foundation, Washington University, and the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities for their "generous assistance." Great work, guys.

The irony is that when Gass first discussed *The Tunnel*, he struck the defiant pose of the lone, proud artist camped in his foxhole, determined to buck the philistines and go against the American grain. "Who knows, perhaps it will be such a good book no one will want to publish it. I live on that hope," he said. For all his flirting with the prospect of *The Tunnel* containing the explosive power of a Forbidden Book (call the bomb squad! this baby could go off at any moment, taking the traditional novel with it!), he has hardly found himself shunned by fiction editors. His acknowledgments also mention that portions of the novel have appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Esquire*, *Fiction*, *Grand Street*, *Granta*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *New Letters*, *The Paris Review*, *Perspective*, *Salmagundi*, *TriQuarterly*, and *The Yale Review*. Which suggests that as bad as Gass is, he isn't as bad as he wants to be, or thinks he is. His guff can be accommodated. Goading the reader with obscenity and bigotry, Gass breathes so hard, we never believe Kohler as a cracked vessel of foul vapors and invidious intent. He's a bogus boogie-man, guilty of overacting. He hogs the page.

The Tunnel bellyflops not because it is morally repugnant or systematically repellent, but because it is so damned literary, or rather literary in the wrong way. *The Tunnel* aspires to the unparaphrasable status of pure style, not the skeletal whiteness of Gass's story "The Pedersen Kid" but the imperial swagger and flash of Flaubert. Kohler's pride in achieving "Nothing" with his tunnel echoes Flaubert's desire to write a novel which would be "a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support." Style for its own sake can harden into fancy claptrap, a suit of armor with no one inside. As Kingsley Amis observed in a dissenting review of Nabokov's *Lolita*, "Style, a personal style, a distinguished style, usually turns out in practice to mean a high idiosyncratic noise level in the writing, with plenty of rumble and wow from imagery, syntax, and diction . . ." Now and then Gass stuns with a simple statement: "My father suffered thirty years of pain. A continent could call it a war." But for the most part, *The Tunnel* is as loud as a factory-floor as Gass lambastes the reader with showy catchphrases, schoolboy puns ("regular as cock work"), sound effects ("like the menacing beat of my army's boots: thap thap thap . . ."), colorful relatives bellowing in bold caps ("HOW CAN A MAN REMAIN SANE WITH ALL THIS GABBLE AND GEESE HISS GOIN ON AROUND HIM?"), outdoing even Nabokov in his compulsive use of alliteration: "Mammaries in memory invade my meditative moment." "Honesty is the historian's hardest hoe, Herschel insists." "We are all charter members of the 4-H Club: Hitler, Hess, Heydrich, Himmler. Heil nonny nonny and a Ho Ho Ho!" ". . . feel that formerly feckless fist smash a hated face into blissfully bloody bits."

Fist is a driving word in *The Tunnel*. It ap-

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pears often in the early pages of the novel, symbol of the author's fighting anger. Gass has called *The Tunnel* a bitter book, but it's beyond bitter, this beating rhythm in his fists. What is the source of Gass's bottomless anger? In his recent *Antaeus* essay, Gass reveals that, like the parents in *The Tunnel*, his father was a bigot and his mother an alcoholic. "[She] was drunk more than a dozen years before the blood vessels in her throat burst and she drowned by drinking her own blood." The big theatrical revelation in *The Tunnel* (despite Gass's disdain for drama, it has the third-act audience-hushing pathos of a monologue in Eugene O'Neill or William Inge) is a recounting of the disastrous birthday party for young Willie. For paragraphs, pages, he describes the preparations, the balloons, the chocolate cake decorated with Hershey's kisses. On the big day, disaster—no one attends. Out of a drunken fog, his mother speaks. "I remembered the plates," she says, "but I may have forgotten to mail the invitations."

The air tenses. "My mother is watching my father watch her watch him. She has just come out of the kitchen with the cake. She passes a vague hand across her face. I'm sorry, she tries to say. I found the envelopes in the drawer this morning, she confesses. With the forks." Gass scorns realism (it's not inward or language-intensive enough for him), yet this is the only scene in the entire 650-page novel that seems to be honestly happening before our eyes and not intermediatied through musty filters of modernist funk or buried under the dead paw of the past. The German catastrophe Kohler contemplates is an elaborate, sloppy fake-front. It isn't the Holocaust that's haunting Gass, it's alcoholism: a drunken mother dashing the hopes she's raised. When Kohler realizes there's to be no party, he mutters, in one of the novel's rare understatements, "Boy. We almost had a good time." Then Gass cranks up the wind-machine and *The Tunnel* ends with a Joycean gust of reverie that will fool no one with its forced lyricism.

It's modernism's last gasp, and way too late.

Not worth the powder

Garry Wills Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's "Macbeth."
The New York Public Library/ Oxford University Press,
223 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Donald Lyons

Garry Wills has paused in his efforts to unearth the egalitarian implications in key documents of American history and has turned his attention to, of all things, *Macbeth*. The result could be worse. It could, for instance, be a work of academic New Historicism that sees the play as "inscribing" subservience/ subversion to a repressive Court, etc.—fill in the blanks. Instead, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's "Macbeth"* exemplifies a more amiably old-fashioned kind of dottiness.

It is Wills's thesis that there is a problem about *Macbeth* (he cites "the seeming unplayability of the piece," actors' superstitions, and so on) and that he has found the clue. *Macbeth*, produced late in 1606, was, he claims, a Gunpowder Plot play. On November 5, 1605, a "cell of papists . . . directed from Rome by skulking Jesuits" and led in London by one Guy Fawkes, had been detected in an attempt to blow up King James and Parliament on the Parliament's opening day. There followed an orgy of show trials and grisly executions. Wills compares the trauma of it all to Pearl Harbor and to Dallas. The very language of the day was impregnated by the event: "Words like 'train' and 'blow' could no more be used 'innocently' in the aftermath of the Powder Plot than could 'sneak attack' or 'grassy knoll' in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor or John Kennedy's assassination. Once President Roosevelt called Pearl Harbor 'a stab in the back' in his declaration-of-war request to Congress, that phrase became 'hot,' as if by radiation-contamination." Sure enough, a few supposedly telltale words pop up in the play: "Devilish Macbeth/ By many of these trains . . ." and "heaven's cherubim . . ./ Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye." Such

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"Gunpowder" vocabulary is much more evident, however, in two other plays: *The Devil's Charter* (1606), by Barnabe Barnes, and *The Whore of Babylon* (1606), by Thomas Dekker. Out of these three plays Wills concocts a "Gunpowder" genre that he compares to the Western film. The Barnes play, which was produced by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, presents Pope Alexander VI (Borgia) and Satan plotting the assassination of Queen Elizabeth. Dekker, too, shows "the papal Whore" plotting with Jesuits to get rid of the Protestant queen. "This," suggests Wills confidently, "is a transparent way of showing how the Plotters tried to kill James." Actually, it seems more like a transparent way of showing how Jesuits tried to kill Elizabeth. In any case, both the Dekker and the Barnes plays seem, from Wills's quotations and from glances at the Dekker, to be lurid and simplistic melodramas running to language like, "Blow up, pull down, ruin all!"

Wills admits, though, that this solemn hunting for "Gunpowder" buzzwords tells us little about *Macbeth*. And, by the way, his cavalier handling of well-known American buzzwords does not inspire confidence in his mastery of arcane Jacobean sources: FDR used a phrase like "stab in the back" not about Pearl Harbor, of course, but about Italy's cowardly attack on France on May 11, 1940.

Wills's principal arguments concern Shakespeare's use of witchcraft and of "jesuitry"—for which read "equivocation." On the first, he wants to prove that Macbeth is "one of the great male witches of drama," like Faustus in Marlowe or the Pope in Barnes or the Jesuit Campion in Dekker. But Faustus and Alexander and Dekker's Plotters explicitly and ritualistically summon the powers of darkness; that is, they behave like witches. Macbeth, alas, does not. He is sought out by them unbidden. The sole scene to use a conjuring recipe is the first scene in Act IV, where the three witches are joined by Hecate to assure Macbeth about the "impossibilities" attending his hypothetical overthrow and to vouchsafe him the Procession of Kings. "Where is the circle," asks Wills plaintively, "in *Macbeth*'s conjuring scene?" He is reduced to scenic diagrams and directorial exhortations ("Macbeth must stand close to the cauldron") and desperate conjectures ("The first three witches may have performed a more complete ritual in the [lost] 1606 version"). But what a waste of effort in the first place, this straining to prove Macbeth a witch and *Macbeth* therefore a true "Gunpowder" play. Poor Shakespeare expends his genius in creating a man damned not by malignant sprites but by his own moral weakness, and along comes Wills to insist that Macbeth is a garden-variety ritual diabolist after all. As Pope has the pedant Bentley boast in *The Dunciad*:

> Turn what they will to Verse, their toil is vain,
> Critics like me shall make it Prose again.

Regarding Lady Macbeth's witch-status, Wills solemnly concludes that "she never became a witch, like her husband, but she entertained witch fantasies." In this, she is likened to the character of Lucretia Borgia in the Barnes play, although it is granted that "Shakespeare is more subtle than Barnes." One can only conclude that "witch fantasies" are catching. This chapter does, though, contain some interesting speculation about the gifted boy-actor John Rice, who apparently in the space of a few years played Cleopatra, the Fool in *Lear*, Lucretia Borgia, Lady Macbeth—and likely doubled as Lady Macduff in *Macbeth*. Wills is in general much more valuable on actors—he reprints some intriguing data on how Olivier played Macbeth—than on buried topicalities.

As for "jesuitry" in *Macbeth*, Wills finds it in two places: in the Porter's jokes and in Malcolm's testing of Macduff by pretending to be wicked. That the Porter's jests contain topical allusions to Jesuits under the rubric of "equivocation" is neither news nor very important. Secondly, Malcolm's testing of Macduff is in Shakespeare's source, the chronicler Holinshed, where Malcolm, the good-king-to-be, falsely accuses himself of

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lust, avarice, and dissimulation/equivocation. But—alas for Wills—Shakespeare changes the last self-accusation to general wickedness—that is, he de-jesuitizes, de-topicalizes the gravamen! Why should Shakespeare, supposedly writing a "Gunpowder" play, thus unpowder himself? Well, says Wills, it's like this: he's had Macbeth utter generalities about the powers of darkness, so he has Malcolm utter parallel generalities about the dark side of himself. It is an unconvincing answer to an unnecessary question. As is the whole book, which concludes by vainly hoping that its trivial lucubrations will prove useful to future directors of this great play.

The Word in English

David Daniell
William Tyndale: A Biography.
Yale University Press,
429 pages, $30

reviewed by C. H. Sisson

We live in an age in which information threatens to overwhelm knowledge—an age which will certainly leave more records of itself than can be digested by posterity. It is sobering, therefore, to look back on a past in which even great and famous figures are inadequately documented. Biographies are now *de rigueur* for many writers who certainly cannot be said to have left monuments more enduring than bronze, and personal details may be said to have a greater success for their own sake than for any light they throw on the literary quality of what has been written. We should probably be grateful for our ignorance of Shakespeare and Chaucer. But the present superstition is rather that great writers deserve large biographies, and it is no surprise that the quincentenary of William Tyndale, the great translator of the Bible into English, should have inspired a large volume—the first on the subject in nearly sixty years.

Inevitably, such an endeavor is full of uncertainties and speculations. "There is a great deal of work to be done on Tyndale," David Daniell confesses, "in every area of his life." The "most likely place of his birth" is Stinchcombe in Gloucestershire; the date is *probably* 1494. It is "not yet known for certain when he became a priest, only that he did." And so it is, at many points of Tyndale's life, till he is burned at the stake for heresy in 1536. But if, in such circumstances, any biography must, by modern standards, be a bit thin, David Daniell has outstanding qualifications for undertaking to do what can be done. Himself with a background in both theology and English literature, he is interested particularly—and profoundly—in the Bible translations, and "this book is offered to give strength to such studies." It follows that what is on offer is a book of distinctly academic color: the general reader who wishes to celebrate the quincentenary by reminding himself of the main outline of Tyndale's story might do better to turn to the relevant ten or twelve pages of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. But Daniell has produced the splendid Yale modern-spelling editions of both Tyndale's Old Testament and his New Testament, and he is a Shakespeare scholar of some distinction whose approach to the language of those books is directed by literary as much as by theological interests. It is not altogether reassuring, however, that, closer to our own time, his attention has been on John Buchan, on whom he has also done work on a grand scale. Yet his general sense of Tyndale's language cannot be faulted.

The English into which Tyndale translates "has a special quality for the time, being the simple, direct form of the spoken language, with the dignity and harmony that make it perfect for what it is doing. Tyndale is in the process of giving us a Bible language . . . Tyndale's conscious use of every-day words, without inversions, in a neutral word-order, and his wonderful ear for rhythmic patterns, gave to the English not only a Bible language, but a new prose." It has been of enduring importance to English literature that it was to the nation's "chief book" that he

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gave it. Tyndale's work was indeed largely taken up into the Authorized (King James) Version of 1611, and Daniell appears to be jealous, on behalf of his subject, that there was no public attribution, although that was surely right, in the circumstances of the time: the translators, in their address "To the Reader," say

> We never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better.

Daniell niggles a bit about some of the changes, but he might more charitably have remarked on the good sense of the panel of translators in founding their work so extensively on Tyndale's. And certainly the allegation that "Tyndale has been most unfairly neglected" seems of slight importance beside the success of the work done for generations of English-speakers.

The paucity of exact biographical material about Tyndale is such that it could easily have been encased in a single chapter of a book of the size we are given here. What the author has done—drawing upon an extensive knowledge of the age, its theology and its language—is to take us through the years in question, and the places in question, exercising himself on whatever matters seem to have a bearing, or a possible bearing, on the production of these superb translations. The first chapter ("Gloucestershire") makes much of the point that "some of the greatest users of the English language have been on the edges of other cultures and other tongues." Even Shakespeare is brought in, on a surely rather exaggerated view of Stratford-on-Avon as a frontier town; Chaucer on the ground that, as "an official working in the Pool of London," he "spent many of his hours talking to sailors of many nationalities"; and Tyndale, who was certainly a remarkable linguist, on account of the links Gloucestershire offered as a result of the wool trade. When we follow Tyndale to Oxford, we begin to get into the world of rhetoric as well as of theology: once more, it is possible influences that we are told about, rather than hard information about the subject himself that we are given. From Oxford, Tyndale goes on to Cambridge, but "precisely when he knew his calling to translate the New Testament from Greek for everyone, we do not know."

After Cambridge, Tyndale went back to Gloucestershire, employed as a tutor to the children at Little Sodbury manor, where he had leisure and protection enough to translate the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus. Even there he could not be free of the religio-political complications of the time. The next move was to London, where he had hopes of translating the New Testament under the ecclesiastical protection of Tunstall, Bishop of London—which did not work out—and, probably in 1524, he set out for Germany, having been unable to find high enough authority to protect him in England. "When it was he did the work of translation we cannot know," Daniell tells us, but "after snubs, set-backs and delays in England," somewhen—"probably in the summer of 1525"—he stood "in a prosperous print-shop" in Cologne watching, "coming off a press, sheets of [his] translation of the New Testament from Greek into English." That is the beginning of the story which gives us reason to celebrate Tyndale's birth after five hundred years. Daniell makes the point that the first sentences we have from Tyndale himself, in his prologue to the Cologne Bible, "are about the craft and skill of translating. It is possible," Daniell says, "and today most frequently done, to write about Tyndale as polemicist, as propagandist, as political reformer, as moralist, as theologian, as historian, as enemy of the institutions of the Church: yet he first presents himself as a working translator of the Scriptures." Daniell contrasts this with "Luther's lofty opening." But "inside that mildness," he adds, "was found an attack on the Church so dangerous that it could only be countered by the most vicious burnings, of books and men and women."

This diagnosis is borne out by the rest of

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this book, devoted in turn to "Persecution and Polemics," "Hebrew and the Old and New Testaments" ("we do not know" where Tyndale learned Hebrew), and "Martyrdom." These parts take us deep into those aspects of English politics, and of such figures as More, Wolsey, and Thomas Cromwell, as affect Tyndale's concerns. They include chapters on Tyndale's Pentateuch and the (revised) New Testament of 1534, and on the dramatic sequence of events which led to his being seized in Antwerp in 1535. The final scenes of his life might be called melodramatic. They include episodes which might not inappropriately find a place in a modern spy story, and indeed throughout Tyndale's life we are reminded how often and how deeply, in the early sixteenth century, religion and politics were intertwined. Tyndale's imprisonment and what followed involved his betrayer, a psychopathic character known as Henry Phillips, who had stolen money from his father and was badly in need of more, as well as the attorney of the Holy Roman Emperor, a "secret employer" in London, and, according to Foxe, "great persons in the Church." Tyndale had been in prison in Vilvorde, near Brussels, for 450 days when he was "formally condemned as a heretic, degraded from the priesthood, and handed over to the secular authorities," strangled at the stake, and his dead body burned—a gentler fate, after all, than awaited Cranmer, who was burned alive.

Daniell makes the point that, faced with difficulties in London after his hopeful move there in about 1523, there must have come a moment at which Tyndale realized that, unless something was done quite outside the Church's approval, "England was to remain without a vernacular translation of the Bible." A German translation had been published in Strasbourg in 1466, and was rapidly followed by others. The first printed Bible in Italian dates from 1471, in French "from about 1474," in Catalan from 1478, with parts in Spanish and Portuguese before 1500. Naturally these were mostly from the Vulgate, but the Greek of Erasmus's New Testament was gradually making its way, as indeed was the Hebrew Old Testament. The Renaissance did not make its way westward instantaneously.

Daniell emphasizes that "the high renaissance translator was no harmless drudge or lowly artisan; he was an artist and inventor." Surely anyone who successfully translates a great work from the past must have something of these qualities: they are no less to be remarked, certainly, in Dryden's Virgil, some 150 years later, and in Chaucer, as well as in Gavin Douglas's *Aeneid*, North's Plutarch, and Chapman's Homer, all of whom Daniell properly invokes. Chapman's explicit appeal to "the sentences, forms and figures of speech proposed by his author," and to adorning them "with figures and forms of oration fitted to the original in the same tongue to which they are translated," clearly appeals strongly to Daniell, whose approach is rather that of an academic critic than of a performer in the field of translation. The performer is unlikely to want to go beyond Dryden's claim: "taking all the Materials of this divine author, I have endeavour'd to make Vergil speak such English, as he wou'd himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age." It was certainly thus that Tyndale managed, as Daniell says, "to work as a translator with the sounds and rhythms as well as the senses of English, to create unforgettable words, phrases, paragraphs and chapters, and to do so in a way that, again unusually for the time, is still, today, direct and living: newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people even than Shakespeare."

It is in the translations rather than in the life of the translator that the reader will find Tyndale himself. The common speech he started from was something different from the media-speak of our own time, which now sometimes surfaces like scum in our Bible translations and service-forms. Our situation is different from that of people of the sixteenth century, and the Anglican Church certainly suffers from the delusion—

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extraordinary, when you come to think of it, for a body which claims a continuous tradition of two thousand years—that the language of such figures as Cranmer and Tyndale no longer has any "relevance."

Shorter notices

H. L. Mencken
A Second Mencken Chrestomathy. Selected, revised, and annotated by the author. Edited, and with an introduction, by Terry Teachout.
Knopf, 491 pages, $30

H. L. Mencken's admirers will eagerly welcome this new collection of his writings, compiled by Mencken himself as a complement to his 1949 anthology, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, and only recently discovered in manuscript by his assiduous biographer, Terry Teachout. For those of us who remain skeptical, however, the publication of a second comprehensive "chrestomathy"—which Mencken defines as "a collection of choice passages from an author or authors"—offers an occasion to reconsider Mencken's work on its own terms, quite apart from any recent questions about his personal prejudices.

Since Montaigne's *Essays*, one of the great attractions of reading an essayist has been the opportunity to follow the introspective motion of a richly furnished mind. The particular pleasure of reading *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* comes from the balance between Mencken's satirical laughter at the spectacle of America and his lucid pessimism, reflected in this anthology in his appreciations of such writers as Conrad, Dreiser, Zola, Thomas Huxley, and Nietzsche. Yet all too often even the sympathetic reader finds that the impersonality and generality of Mencken's observations, the famously rapid cadence of his prose, and his assertion of authority without argument or evidence have together produced a hollow if still quite comical effect. Mencken lacks the more fully persuasive, supple quality of those essayists who, like Montaigne, stress introspection and observation, hesitation and uncertainty.

Consider, for example, Mencken's treatment of the mob in this excerpt from the essay "On Being an American": "The mob-man cannot grasp ideas in their native nakedness. They must be dramatized and personalized for him, and provided with either white wings or forked tails. All discussion of them, to interest him, must take the form of a pursuit and scotching of demons. He cannot think of a heresy without thinking of a heretic to be caught, condemned and burned. In all such phenomena I take unfeigned delight. They fill me with contentment, and hence make me a happier and better American." Now if one compares this passage to George Orwell's well-known essay "Shooting an Elephant," it is apparent that Orwell's opinion of the mob which confronted him as a policeman in Burma does not differ greatly from Mencken's. But it is Orwell's persuasively frank opinion of himself, as he considered whether to shoot an elephant in response to the expectations of this mob, that remains in the foreground. Mencken is a wit; he aims at comical targets and hits them squarely and sharply. Orwell, aiming at an elephant or something less corporeal, often encounters himself.

As a critic, Mencken admires the cultivated individual and the cultural ideals of the aristocracy, but he reveals a peculiar coarseness and narrowness of taste. In "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," Mencken advocates the critical procedure of Goethe, which he reasonably reduces to the formula: What is the artist trying to do, and how has he done it? But note, for example, his failure to apply this procedure to the music of Tchaikovsky. Rather than examining the intentions of this "modern music," Mencken, with his usual wit, discovers only the absence of the most familiar, conventional pattern: "One yearns unspeakably for a composer who gives out his pair of honest themes, and then develops them with both ears open, and then recapitulates them unashamed, and then hangs a brisk coda to

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them, and then shuts up." In this anthology a previously unpublished late note presents some especially obtuse criticism of Jane Austen—*Mansfield Park*, he writes, is "a dull novel about a stupid group of English country gentry"—and Rossini and Haydn are made to represent the most superficial level of musical taste. A more aristocratic writer like Stendhal would notably disagree.

Terry Teachout suggests in his thoughtful introduction that Mencken is ultimately most valuable for his attractive point of view: a bleak, pessimistic, finally tragic sense of life which still allows for laughter while facing the abyss. Mencken alludes to the tragic aspect of his own point of view when he describes the pessimism of Dreiser; he finds in the novels of Dreiser "the same profound pessimism that we have from Hardy, Moore, Zola and the great Russians—the pessimism of disillusion—not the jejune, Byronic thing, not the green sickness of youth, but that pessimism which comes from the discovery that the riddle of life, despite all the fine solutions offered by the learned doctors, is essentially insoluble." Yet it is not clear that Mencken himself fully supports this difficult tragic view. In the swiftness of his wit and his prose, and in the coarseness of his cultural tastes and his political opinions, there remains little scope for skepticism and uncertainty, for irony and introspection—for tragedy. In the largest sense Mencken certainly thought of himself as a skeptic, but sentence by barreling sentence he speeds past too quickly for doubt.

—*Alan Rutenberg*

A. J. Liebling
Liebling at "The New Yorker": Uncollected Essays. Edited by James Barbour and Fred Warner. University of New Mexico Press, 320 pages, $29.95

When, in 1935, Joe Liebling took a job as reporter at *The New Yorker*, he was weary from fighting with newspaper prose-butchers and eager to start his real life as a writer. *The New Yorker* was then only ten years old, and Liebling had just turned thirty: the two would, in effect, grow up together. *The New Yorker* would give Liebling the freedom to become Liebling, and Liebling, almost singlehandedly, would give *The New Yorker* its reputation as the place where journalism could sometimes also be literature.

That first year, though, as he later recalled it, was a rough one—he had perfected "a successful newspaper short-feature method that was not directly transferable to a magazine, especially in long pieces. It would have been like running a mile in a series of hundred-yard dashes." But once he hit his stride, he never stumbled: he could turn out copy, as he himself liked to brag, faster than anyone who could write better, and better than anyone who could write faster. Over the next twenty-seven years, until his death in 1963, he would publish hundreds of first-rate pieces in the magazine, stories long and short, signed and unsigned, on boxers and bookies, food and wine, the Second World War and Chicago, the Second City—on anything and everything that caught his singular fancy. A lot of these pieces later made it into his books: *The Honest Rainmaker*, *The Road Back to Paris*, *The Press*, *Between Meals*, and a dozen or so others. But, then again, a lot of them didn't: with a deadline writer so wayward and prolific, there were bound to be plenty of fugitives.

James Barbour and Fred Warner, both of the English Department at the University of New Mexico, have made a hobby of collecting the uncollected Liebling: in 1990 they gave us *A Neutral Corner*, which brought together the boxing stories Liebling wrote after *The Sweet Science* (1955); now they have given us *Liebling at "The New Yorker,"* their choice of the best of the rest. If *A Neutral Corner* was a one-dish meal, this new book is a smorgasbord: the thirty-three items gathered here make for a tasting of many different Lieblings. The earliest item, a profile of the odds-maker at a Long Island horse-track, is dated 1937; the latest, a reverie on the twilight cityscape seen looking west

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from the author's office window, is the last thing of Liebling's that *The New Yorker* published, in January 1964. Between them lie an account of the U.S. Navy's only mutiny, in 1842; reviews of biographies of Ernie Pyle and Stephen Crane; a short history of bouillabaisse; and a look into the complete transcripts of the HUAC hearings ("a sequence of dramas that are Shakespearean except for the poverty of the idiom"). There's more, and it's equally various, the only really coherent grouping being a dozen wartime letters from France, 1939–44.

Any lover of Liebling will be happy to have this book, for it augments the author's short bookshelf by another volume, and it rescues from oblivion such tidbits as the following, a mini-masterpiece of on-the-fly sociology concerning "clockers"—the guys at the track who time horses in their trials, in this case for the odds-maker Tex Grenet:

> [Ollie Thomas] carries a $450 Tiffany stopwatch in his right vest pocket. In his left hand he holds a $45 steel watch with which he does his work. He doesn't want to "wear out the works" of his expensive watch.
>
> Each of his co-workers, like Ollie, carries a good watch, which he rests, and a comparatively cheap one with which he earns his living. The good watch is for prestige, occasional collateral, and insurance. The first professional clocker was a colored man named Hoggie Shields. "His was the common end of clockers," Tex says. "They auctioned his watch to bury him." Lou Salyers, a white clocker, carries Shields' watch now. He bought it at the sale.

It also rescues this, a characteristic Liebling romp through English nomenclature, combined with a sigh for the way things used to be:

> Not long ago, when I was in London, I bought myself a derby or dicer, a bowler or tifter or *chapeau melon*—in other words, a billycock or hard hat, although the shop where I bought it prefers to call it a coke. It was the first I had ever owned, and made me feel full-grown for the first time in fifty-one years, because my father, like every other New Yorker of his day, always wore one when I was a boy. All I have to do now is learn to shave with a straight razor on a moving railroad train and I will satisfy my own time-obscured image of adulthood.

But to be happy to have this book is not the same thing as to be happy with it. It may contain some wonderful prose, but as a piece of anthology-making, *Liebling at "The New Yorker"* is a disappointment. From Professor Warner's fawning introduction to the incomplete source notes and slavishly chronological ordering of contents, it's an amateur production, an uncritical act of fannish homage, a lining-up of little bones in a cloth-and-cardboard reliquary that asks nothing from the public but the obeisance of the faithful. Poor Liebling! At a time when so much of his work is out of print, and when an entire reading generation has come of age never having heard his name, he deserves better. One hopes that he soon finds a *real* anthologist, one who can do for him what, for example, Malcolm Cowley did for Faulkner, namely give him back to readers in all his richness and help secure his place in the parade of American letters.

—*Christopher Carduff*

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Notebook

The Abbé & the great world

by Louis Auchincloss

The Paris journal of the Abbé Mugnier, which he kept for sixty years (1879–1939), was published by Mercure de France in 1985 and has yet to been done into English. It is the remarkable record of a priest who knew and confessed the cream of the old aristocracy of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and who was also the friend and sometimes the intimate of many of the leading literary and artistic lights of the time.

The Abbé's nobler qualities have been somewhat swamped by his reputation as the spiritual guide of the *gratin* and by his long remembered quips, as, for example, his reply to the aging actress who asked him if it was a sin for her to admire her own beauty when she looked in a mirror: "No, my dear, it's only an error." Or to the avid social climber who, finding that each new level he attained was not the "true" faubourg, asked impatiently if the true faubourg was simply where he *wasn't*: "I didn't want to be the one to tell you."

It is perfectly true, as the Abbé admitted in his journal, that he loved the "great world," with its "titles, beautiful houses, gilded panels, chandeliers, wits, and celebrities," but he hoped, as with Proust, whose good friend he became, that its attraction was largely in the romantic historical associations that it provided for his intensely active imagination. He certainly never allowed himself to overlook the shabby aspects of society.

"These people have a way of translating their bad habits into principles," he wrote. "Emptiness and ennui are sublimated into sacred etiquette. . . . No aristocrat is apt to have a true and original talent for writing. He is too *comme il faut*. There are too many servants between him and reality. Noblemen don't fraternize. Talent *tutoie*."

And he disapproved heartily of the lady who boasted to him, in the first war, that she had actually shaken hands with one of her footmen who had gained the *croix de guerre*. "But you wouldn't have asked him to sit down at the dining room table with you!" one of the company who heard her exclaimed. For these people the preservation of social distinctions was as vital as winning the war.

Arthur Mugnier was born in 1853 in Lubersac, where his father had supervised the restoration of the château, and after the latter's early death, leaving his family with slender resources, his devout mother took him to Paris and used all of her strong influence on him to induce him to take orders. He was then a timid and naïve youth, very spiritual and fearful of sinning. With a different mother he might never have entered the church. But she was motivated, not only by her desire to create peace of mind for her son, but by her notion that she was propelling him into a career where the social ladder would be more easily scaled. In this she was more successful than she could have dreamed. When she died in 1903 her son

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noted: "The poor young woman from Lorraine who came to Paris with so few prospects had dukes and princes at her obsequies!"

For it did not take a sophisticated society long to find out that there was a vicar in the neighborhood who understood the temptations of life and did not fulminate boringly about human lapses. To Mugnier souls were souls, and it was his job to save them and not to shake his head and thunder comminations. The tolerance and wisdom that he rapidly developed once he was free of what he had considered the mind-stifling seminary, together with his ready wit and large heart, made him as welcome in the drawing room as in the confessional. Hostesses would instruct their servants to clean or repair his worn hat and gloves and umbrella when they were left in the coatroom, for he never seemed to give a thought to his own appearance. Of course, some people laughed at this. The poet Anna de Noailles suggested there was an element of coquetry in his shabbiness. She could have been right.

His relations with the church and its hierarchy were never easy. He was always critical of the organizational side of the clerical establishment. In this entry of 1905 he penned a protest in the form of an imagined address to his superiors.

> You talk only of parishional and cultural associations. You spend all your energy on these. The inward faith is relegated to the bottom of the pile. And what of justice, charity, resignation, courage, and all that makes up the human soul? The question of *church* kills the question of religion. Religion is a movement of the spirit, of the heart. You have made it a power, a society, an exterior force, something in conflict with other powers and other societies. In order to love God and one's neighbor, is so much materialism necessary? How far we are from what Christ wished! He wouldn't even tolerate the Temple.

And when armageddon came in 1914 he noted that in all the years of his priesthood he had never once heard what should have been the great voice of the church denouncing hate: hate of the Republic, hate of the Jews, hate of Dreyfus, hate of Germans. The world had gone mad.

> I can only retreat into my shell. . . . We should make peace, and nobody wants to. They'd rather kill a generation of Frenchmen for the sake of France. We slaughter in the name of God!

For the first half of his ecclesiastical career the Abbé was vicar (assistant to the curé) in the Church of Sainte-Clotilde in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, but in 1909 his hospitality to a renegade priest who had taken a wife caused such a scandal that he was advised by his superiors to resign his vicarship and go into temporary retirement. A year later he was assigned to the lower office of almoner to the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, at an inconvenient but not unmanageable distance from his dinner parties in the old faubourg, which post he held until his final retirement. No doubt his powerful friends saved him from a more rigorous disciplining.

Fortunately, he was devoid of clerical ambitions. He might, however, have been tempted to sell his soul to become a great writer. Literature was the love of his life, making up for a wife and family, making up, indeed, for everything, and, wistfully acknowledging his own lack of creative talent, he resigned himself to the lesser joys of reading and the cultivation of the authors whom he admired.

His first close friend among the latter was J.-K. Huysmans, the naturalist writer, a friend and follower of Zola, and author of the exquisitely decadent novel *A Rebours*, whose protagonist was modeled on the flamboyant epicurean Robert de Montesquieu. Huysmans was endowed with a feverish imagination and a scholastic fascination with the occult. He loved to explore the dark world of satanic cults and black masses, though at the same time flayed by a puritanical conscience that made him gag at his own sexual proclivities. It was the Abbé

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who led him gently into the arms of the church and made of him a reformed and chaste penitent.

The conversion started with Huysmans's temporary retreat in 1892 into a monastery.

> Last night Huysmans, on his balcony, gave his impressions, between two glasses of beer, of his visit to La Trappe. He was much troubled by obscene fantasies. He took communion twice, but the pressures and urges of the devil were such that he even contemplated suicide. The father who confessed him didn't seem surprised by this, and one monk frankly admitted to him that it was a common experience of inmates to be obsessed with sexual visions and temptations. Huysmans's retort was: "So one has no peace, even here!" Zola's only comment to him on his monastic visit was that he must be cracked.

The Abbé gained considerable fame for bringing this gifted heretic into the Roman fold, with writers as well as with the faithful. He was now sought not only as a preacher but as a lecturer on literary matters. Huysmans introduced him to his fellow authors, who, however initially suspicious of a priest at their gatherings, soon learned to welcome this gentle and charming enthusiast who understood their work, enjoyed their dirty jokes without raising an eyebrow, and never sought to convert them. As Bernard Berenson was later to say to the Abbé: "You are the most unprejudiced man I've ever met." Bohemia as well as the old faubourg could appreciate a perfect guest.

> November 20, 1896. Huysmans talked of the porcine pleasures of Guy de Maupassant. One evening at a party of fourteen men (Huysmans was one of them) Maupassant boasted that he could tire a woman out making love. The party then adjourned to a bordello where Maupassant, put to the test, stripped before all and came five times with his chosen partner. Flaubert, ecstatic, cried "How refreshing!" Huysmans asserts that there is none more shameless than Maupassant. Another time, after he and Huysmans and Paul Bourget had dined together, and Bourget having suggested they make a night of it, they had gone to a bordello. Maupassant, in the parlor where they met the girls, suddenly yanked down Bourget's pants and cried out: "Is *this* all you have to show these ladies?" Bourget fled.

Decades later, in 1935, on a visit to Chartres, the Abbé, thinking back on the now long dead Huysmans and on the beautiful novel he had written about its cathedral, moaned at the intransigence of clerics who had never been touched by the sublime architecture before their eyes.

> It disgusted me to recall, when Huysmans published *La Cathédrale*, the blindness of the clergy of the region. Of all the priests, curés, canons, seminary professors, and bishops of the diocese of Chartres, who had lived in the shadow of this magnificent monument, not one had consecrated a lasting page to its glorification. We had to wait until the end of the nineteenth century for a disciple of Zola, emerging from the sewers of naturalism, to discover, towering over the harvest fields of La Bauce, "the blonde with the blue eyes." Oh, ecclesiastical sterility!

A good half of the journal is devoted to portraits of the writers the Abbé knew. We see Anatole France "with the specious air of an old count of the Faubourg Saint-Germain or perhaps rather that of a retired army officer." We hear Cocteau likening a play of Henry Bernstein, which sought to take a crude advantage of the patriotic war fever of 1917, to "a street walker in widow's weeds." And here is Anna de Noailles:

> She would like to be the cross, the Arc de Triomphe, Napoleon. She is the hypertrophe of myself. She knows no bounds. She should have lived in Alexandria, in Byzantium. She is the end of a race. She wants to be loved by every man who's in love with another woman. She should have mated with the sun, the wind, an element.

His first meeting with Proust was in 1917.

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Marcel Proust is very distinguished looking. He quoted a line of Oscar Wilde: "The great event of my life was the death in Balzac of Lucien de Rubempré." He told me that he was still writing books, but he didn't seem to believe that anyone read them. He spoke of cathedrals, Chartres and Reims. Reims has now the look of a woman in whose face vitriol has been flung. The Germans did this to her, according to him, out of jealousy; they have nothing like Reims in their own country. The angels of Reims have Da Vinci smiles. Proust spends most of his time in bed. He quoted Comte Greffulhe, asking him to sign the guest book: "Just your signature, please. No comments."

The Abbé recorded later that Madame de Noailles had been shocked when Proust, in the very room where his deceased mother was laid out, had offered her graceful compliments on her last book of verse. Also, that Madame de Polignac had been less than flattered when Proust had offered to dedicate one of the novels of *A La Recherche* to her late husband. It was *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.

Mugnier never met Oscar Wilde, but he collected some of the sayings of Wilde's last forlorn years in Paris from those who had.

Wilde suggested that the prodigal son had abominable parents. They butchered a veal for him, knowing he hated veal. And that when the woman taken in adultery was released from her accusers, her husband turned up to cast the first stone. Judas bargained the priests up from ten to thirty pieces of silver, only to discover later that the coins were false.

Paul Valéry, like Wilde, had some novel readings of the New Testament.

May 25, 1922. Valéry confided in me that he was not a Christian and that he does not care for the New Testament, which he finds meretricious. He cannot understand the mixture of God and suffering, and he considers the miracles unworthy of a deity. The changing of water into wine was a vulgar trick of prestidigitation. And when Jesus felt the virtue run out of him when someone touched him, he did not realize that he was suffering from hemorrhoids. Nor has Valéry any use for the swine charging into the lake. He maintains that there are several different Christs in the gospels. He defines faith as the power to fabricate the true, a matter of intellectual volition. The real duty is to doubt.

Here is a glimpse of Colette in 1922:

Dined at the Girods with Segonzac, Colette, Paul Morand, Marie Laurencin. Colette, bare-armed in a red print dress, examined all the objects in the room, touched this and that, fingered the ladies' necklaces with admiration, and showed joy at everything. She talked like a child, a *gamine*, who hates restraint and discipline. She claimed she wasn't born to be a writer, that she was made to do nothing, to ride horseback, to swim, to bask in the sun. She loves to give one recipes with picturesque details: "A bouillon shouldn't be too personal."

And here is Valéry again, now in 1925:

I ran into Paul Valéry on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. He talked of carnal love. Voluptuousness, the flesh, he claims, does not really exist. Carnal love is more truly connected with the intellect—and with the deepest part of the intellect. This is one of the curiosities of man. Sex he compares to a truffle which the desert fathers and founders of the church turned into a kind of state affair. By inventing the concept of chastity they made a mountain out of a molehill.

This entry in 1933 juxtaposed amusingly the extremes of the two worlds in which the Abbé lived.

Lunched yesterday with the Descoves. Céline and his mother. The painter Vlaminck. The conversation at table exploded like fireworks. Céline talks fast and noisily; he's a *gamin* type; one sensed the masses. He mimes people well, with all necessary repetitions and "heins." His language was very coarse; my priestly ears were not spared. He has been to

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Berlin and says the people are close to anarchy. They can't possibly make war now; they're too afraid of the communists. He gave us a frightful picture of the coal town Breslau—the middle ages revived. Vlaminck asked him if he was going to continue to write about the subjects he had been treating, and he assured us that he would—with all their horrors. That anything else would be a desertion. Vlaminck, for his part, roundly declared that there were no more painters, either in France, Spain, Germany, or Italy. "*I* am a painter," he naïvely added. "If I weren't convinced of that, I shouldn't paint. I go to a museum as a bordello, to amuse myself, but I don't go upstairs. I don't sleep with Delacroix and the others."

But the writer whose work the Abbé preferred to that of all others, whom he would have most loved to have known and to whose château in Brittany he made reverent periodic pilgrimages, was François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand. When Mugnier died, his old servant was heard to murmur: "Oh, how happy Monsieur l'Abbé will be now! He is going to meet Monsieur le Vicomte at last." Here he is in 1917, writing at his most fulsome:

With Chateaubriand it is love in all its forms: acuteness, voluptuousness, intensity, insatiability, pride, jealousy, desire—a gulf, a whirlpool, love devouring and devoured. The Song of Songs of passion, whose final stanza is death foreseen, sought, the death of all that limits love, the death of God, the end of the world. Love in the conflagration of Valhalla. Love as the summit, the nadir, the anarchy which destroys the object of love, which destroys all existence. Has anything ever been more radical, more logical, more mad in the order of sentiments?

As priest the Abbé was always compassionate, certainly to a fault in the eyes of his fellow clerics. Once, after hearing a peculiarly horrid confession, he left the booth and hurried after the departing sinner to embrace him and exclaim: "Pardoning is not enough—we must love!" He had to believe in hell, he told his parishioners—it was dogma—but he didn't have to believe there was anyone in it. Those who liked to imagine the infernal region as filled with the damned conceived of a god in their own image.

He sighed rather than blustered over the sins that were confessed to him.

A woman can be young, beautiful, a countess, and even pious and still be twice aborted of her husband's doing without telling him.

And another lovely lady wafted the tale of her adultery to him through the grill of the confessional "in a zephyr of sweet perfume."

"Oh, the void of my life!" he exclaimed. "It is in vain that I burden myself with pious tasks or that I rush through the Faubourg Saint-Germain from salon to salon. It all leaves me with a soul that is ravaged, uncertain, dead."

In 1911, after a somber visit to his oculist, he recorded a desperate prayer. "Oh, Lord, let me not be blind! That's all I ask."

The prayer was partially granted. His eyes remained more or less serviceable until 1932, when he recorded: "My life was reading. I am dead."

He survived until 1944, dying in Paris, still lucid, at the age of ninety-one. We do not have his reflections on the German occupation as he discontinued the diary in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of war. One of the last entries records his meeting with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

My eyes did not permit me to make out the features of this more or less royal couple, but I felt their cordiality. It may have been an illusion, but I had a sense of sympathy, particularly from the duchess. Apparently she asked Princess Bibesco, as she was leaving: "Do you think the Abbé would care to dine with us one night?"

The duke had asked him if he remembered the terrible events in Paris of 1871. Of course, he did. From the commune to Mrs. Simpson—what a stretch of time!

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Letters

Donald Francis Tovey

To the Editors:
Readers of *The New Criterion* whose interest in the music of Donald Francis Tovey was piqued by James F. Penrose's excellent essay (November) may enjoy hearing what Constant Lambert, composer of *The Rio Grande* and author of *Music Ho!*, had to say about a 1937 broadcast performance by Pablo Casals, Adrian Boult, and the BBC Symphony of Tovey's Cello Concerto in C Major, op. 40:

> I am told by those who had the moral, physical, and intellectual stamina to sit it out to the end that Professor Donald Tovey's Cello Concerto lasts for over an hour. This I cannot vouch for as, like several other musicians, I was compelled to leave at the end of the first movement, which seemed to last as long as my first term at school, but was probably a little shorter in point of fact. I therefore find myself in the melancholy position of not being able to delight my readers with an account of the work as a whole. All I can say is that the first movement is the most completely null and void piece of music I have ever heard in Queen's Hall.

As it happens, an off-the-air recording exists of the performance attended by Lambert, and the first movement was twenty-three minutes long.

Terry Teachout
New York, N.Y.

He went to Yale

To the Editors:
Regarding the review of the new biography of John Alden Carpenter in your December issue: It comes through vividly to the mind's eye. There's grizzled old Charles Ives whacking Terry Teachout's shoulder with his yellowed *Herald Tribune*, angrily shouting: "Ya Goddamn prevaricator! Why I didn't even go to that Harvard University."

William Thomson
Pasadena, Calif.

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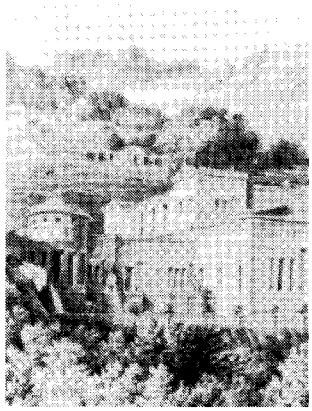

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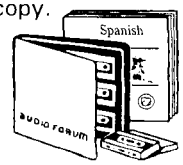

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